Chapter 4

MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, AND OTHER CONTROLLING IMAGES

> Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself.
>
> —Trudier Harris 1982, 4

Race, class, and gender oppression could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. As Cheryl Gilkes contends, "Black women's assertiveness and their use of every expression of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. As punishment, Black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images" (1983a, 294). Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought.

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to

define these symbols is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning Black women. They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or they may create new ones relevant to their needs (Patterson 1982). Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (1987, 22). These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.

Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. The status of African-American women as outsiders or strangers becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, describes how the standpoint of a subordinate group is discredited: "It will not kill people to hear the truth, but they don't like it and they would much rather hear it from one of their own than from a stranger. Now, to white people your colored person is always a stranger. Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can't tell them anything!" (Gwaltney 1980, 29). As the "Others" of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging.

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF BLACK WOMEN AS THE OTHER

Black feminist critic Barbara Christian asserts that in America, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's *Other*" (1985, 160). Maintaining images of Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression.

Certain basic ideas crosscut all three systems. Claimed by Black feminist theorist Bell Hooks to be "the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society," one such idea is either/or dichotomous thinking (1984, 29). Either/or dichotomous thinking categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another (Keller 1985, 8). For example, the terms in the dichotomies black/white (Richards 1980; Irele 1983), male/female (Eisenstein 1983), reason/emotion (Hoschschild 1975; Halpin 1989), culture/nature (Asante 1987), fact/opinion (Westkott

1979; Bellah 1983), mind/body (Spelman 1982), and subject/object (Halpin 1989) gain meaning only in *relation* to their counterparts.

Another basic idea concerns the relationship between notions of differences in either/or dichotomous thinking and objectification. In either/or dichotomous thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its "other." Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts—they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites. Feeling cannot be incorporated into thought or even function in conjunction with it because in either/or dichotomous thinking, feeling retards thought, values obscure facts, and judgment clouds knowledge.

Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In either/or dichotomous thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. Social theorist Dona Richards (1980) suggests that Western thought requires objectification, a process she describes as the "separation of the 'knowing self' from the 'known object'" (p. 72). Intense objectification is a "prerequisite for the despiritualization of the universe," notes Richards, "and through it the Western cosmos was made ready for ever increasing materialization" (p. 72). A Marxist assessment of the culture/nature dichotomy argues that history can be seen as one in which human beings constantly objectify the natural world in order to control and exploit it (Brittan and Maynard 1984, 198). Culture is defined as the opposite of an objectified nature that, if left alone, would destroy culture.[1] Feminist scholars point to the identification of women with nature as being central to women's subsequent objectification by men as sex objects (Eisenstein 1983). Black scholars contend that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more "natural" denies African and Asian people's subjectivity and supports a political economy of domination (Asante 1987).

Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history," asserts Bell Hooks (1989, 42). "As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (p. 42). The treatment afforded Black women domestic workers exemplifies the many forms that objectification can take. Making Black women work as if they were animals or "mules uh de world" represents one form of objectification. Deference rituals such as calling Black domestic workers "girls" and by their first names enable employers to treat their employees like children, as less capable human beings. Objectification can be so severe that the Other simply disappears,

as was the case when Judith Rollins's employer treated her as if she were invisible by conducting a conversation while ignoring Rollins's presence in the room. But in spite of these pressures, Black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history. One significant contribution of work by Judith Rollins (1985), Bonnie Thornton Dill (1980, 1988a), Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (1985), and others is that they document Black women's everyday resistance to this attempted objectification.

Finally, because oppositional dichotomies rarely represent different but equal relationships, they are inherently unstable. Tension is resolved by subordinating one half of the dichotomy to the other. Thus whites rule Blacks, men dominate women, reason is thought superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supersede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. The foundations of a complex social hierarchy become grounded in the interwoven concepts of either/or dichotomous thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.

African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these dichotomies converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination. The allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women's sexual exploitation. Similarly, restricting Black women's literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts for sound judgment, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion dichotomy. Denying Black women status as fully human subjects by treating us as the objectified Other in a range of such dichotomies demonstrates the power that dichotomous either/or thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield in maintaining interlocking systems of oppression. Analyzing the specific, externally defined, controlling images applied to African-American women both reveals the specific contours of Black women's objectification and offers a clearer view of how systems of race, gender, and class oppression actually interlock.

CONTROLLING IMAGES AND BLACK WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

"Black women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America as 'Mammy' and the 'bad black woman,' " contends Cheryl Gilkes (1983a, 294). The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered

the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination. Given that both Black and white women were important to slavery's continuation, the prevailing ideology functioned to mask contradictions in social relations affecting all women. According to the cult of true womanhood, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Elite white women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images. The sexual ideology of the period as is the case today "confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women . . . by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on the other for its existence" (Carby 1987, 25).

The first controlling image applied to African-American women is that of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination.

Black women intellectuals have aggressively deconstructed the image of African-American women as contented mammies by challenging traditional views of Black women domestics (Dill 1980, 1988a; Clark-Lewis 1985; Rollins 1985). Literary critic Trudier Harris's (1982) volume *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* investigates prominent differences in how Black women have been portrayed by others in literature and how they portray themselves. In her work on the difficulties faced by Black women leaders, Rhetaugh Dumas (1980) describes how Black women executives are hampered by being treated as mammies and penalized if they do not appear warm and nurturing. But despite these works, the mammy image lives on in scholarly and popular culture. Audre Lorde's account of a shopping trip offers a powerful example of its tenacity: "I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in . . . 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!' " (1984, 126).[2]

The mammy image is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Since efforts to control African-American family

life require perpetuating the symbolic structures of racial oppression, the mammy image is important because it aims to shape Black women's behavior as mothers. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black women are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior many are forced to exhibit in mammy roles. By teaching Black children their assigned place in white power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. In addition, employing mammies buttresses the racial superiority of white women employers and weds them more closely to their fathers, husbands, and sons as sources of elite white male power (Rollins 1985).

The mammy image also serves a symbolic function in maintaining gender oppression. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian argues that images of Black womanhood serve as a reservoir for the fears of Western culture, "a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront" (1985, 2). Juxtaposed against the image of white women promulgated through the cult of true womanhood, the mammy image as the Other symbolizes the oppositional difference of mind/body and culture/nature thought to distinguish Black women from everyone else. Christian comments on the mammy's gender significance: "All the functions of mammy are magnificently physical. They involve the body as sensuous, as funky, the part of woman that white southern America was profoundly afraid of. Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female" (1985, 2). The mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed. "Good" white mothers are expected to deny their female sexuality and devote their attention to the moral development of their offspring. In contrast, the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family.

No matter how loved they were by their white "families," Black women domestic workers remained poor because they were economically exploited. The restructured post–World War II economy in which African-American women moved from service in private homes to jobs in the low-paid service sector has produced comparable economic exploitation. Removing Black women's labor from African-American families and exploiting it denies Black extended family units the benefits of either decent wages or Black women's unpaid labor in their homes. Moreover, many white families in both the middle class and working class are able to maintain their class position because they have long used Black women as a source of cheap

labor (Rollins 1985; Byerly 1986). The mammy image is designed to mask this economic exploitation of social class (King 1973).

For reasons of economic survival, African-American women may play the mammy role in paid work settings. But within African-American communities these same women often teach their own children something quite different. Bonnie Thornton Dill's (1980) work on child-rearing patterns among Black domestics shows that while the participants in her study showed deference behavior at work, they discouraged their children from believing that they should be deferent to whites and encouraged their children to avoid domestic work. Barbara Christian's analysis of the mammy in Black slave narratives reveals that, "unlike the white southern image of mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot" (1985, 5).

The fact that the mammy image cannot control Black women's behavior as mothers is tied to the creation of the second controlling image of Black womanhood. Though a more recent phenomenon, the image of the Black matriarch fulfills similar functions in explaining Black women's placement in interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Ironically, Black scholars such as William E. B. DuBois (1969) and E. Franklin Frazier (1948) described the connections among higher rates of female-headed households in African-American communities, the importance that women assume in Black family networks, and the persistence of Black poverty. However, neither scholar interpreted Black women's centrality in Black families as a *cause* of African-American social class status. Both saw so-called matriarchal families as an *outcome* of racial oppression and poverty. During the eras when Dubois and Frazier wrote, the oppression of African-Americans was so total that control was maintained without the controlling image of matriarch. But what began as a muted theme in the works of these earlier Black scholars grew into a full-blown racialized image in the 1960s, a time of significant political and economic mobility for African-Americans. Racialization involves attaching racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (Omi and Winant 1986). Prior to the 1960s, female-headed households were certainly higher in African-American communities, but an ideology racializing female-headedness as a causal feature of Black poverty had not emerged. Moreover, "the public depiction of Black women as unfeminine, castrating matriarchs came at precisely the same moment that the feminist movement was advancing its public critique of American patriarchy" (Gilkes 1983a, 296).

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in white homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the

"bad" Black mother. The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African-American women fail to fulfill their traditional "womanly" duties (Moynihan 1965). Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children's school failure. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either desert their partners or refuse to marry the mothers of their children. From an elite white male standpoint, the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to those African-American women who dared to violate the image of the submissive, hard-working servant.

Black women intellectuals examining the role of women in African-American families discover few matriarchs and even fewer mammies (Hale 1980; Myers 1980; Sudarkasa 1981b; Dill 1988b). Instead they portray African-American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play presented on Broadway written by a Black woman, Lorraine Hansberry (1959) examines the struggles of widow Lena Younger to actualize her dream of purchasing a home for her family. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, novelist Paule Marshall (1959) presents Mrs. Boyce, a Black mother negotiating a series of relationships with her husband, her daughters, the women in her community, and the work she must perform outside her home. Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) depicts the struggle of a lesbian mother trying to balance her needs for self-actualization with the pressures of child-rearing in a homophobic community. Like these fictional analyses, Black women's scholarship on Black single mothers also challenges the matriarchy thesis (Ladner 1972; McCray 1980; Lord 1984; McAdoo 1985; Brewer 1988).

Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on intergenerationally via value transmission in families, an elite white male standpoint suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children and that this deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Those African-Americans who remain poor are blamed for their own victimization. Using Black women's performance as mothers to explain Black economic subordination links gender ideology to explanations of class subordination.

The source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior. In the post–World War II era, increasing numbers of white women entered the labor market, limited their fertility, and generally challenged their proscribed roles in white patriarchal institutions. The image of the Black matriarch emerged at that time as a powerful symbol for both Black and white women of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine.

The image of the matriarch also supports racial oppression. Much social science research implicitly uses gender relations in African-American communities as one putative measure of Black cultural disadvantage. For example, the Moynihan Report (1965) contends that slavery destroyed Black families by creating reversed roles for men and women. Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the construct of the ideal "family." Moreover, the absence of Black patriarchy is used as evidence for Black cultural inferiority (Collins 1989). Black women's failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency. Cheryl Gilkes posits that the emergence of the matriarchal image occurred as a counterideology to efforts by African-Americans and women who were confronting interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression: "The image of dangerous Black women who were also deviant castrating mothers divided the Black community at a critical period in the Black liberation struggle and created a wider gap between the worlds of Black and white women at a critical period in women's history" (1983a, 297).

Taken together, images of the mammy and the matriarch place African-American women in an untenable position. For Black women workers in domestic work and other occupations requiring long hours and/or substantial emotional labor, becoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women. Moreover, Black women's financial contributions to Black family well-being have also been cited as evidence supporting the matriarchy thesis (Moynihan 1965). Many Black women are the sole support of their families, and labeling these women "matriarchs" erodes their self-confidence and ability to confront oppression. In essence, African-American women who must work are labeled mammies, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes.

A third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—appears tied to Black women's increasing dependence on the post–World War II welfare state. Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy.

During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than white women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this objectification of Black women as the Other provided justification for interference in the reproductive rights of enslaved Africans. Slaveowners wanted enslaved Africans to "breed" because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves. The externally defined, controlling image of the breeder woman served to justify slaveowner intrusion into Black women's decisions about fertility (King 1973; Davis 1981).

The post–World War II political economy has offered African-Americans rights not available in former historical periods (Fusfeld and Bates 1984; Wilson 1987). African-Americans have successfully acquired basic political and economic protections from a greatly expanded welfare state, particularly Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, unemployment compensation, affirmative action, voting rights, antidiscrimination legislation, and the minimum wage. In spite of sustained opposition by Republican administrations in the 1980s, these programs allow many African-Americans to reject the subsistence-level, exploitative jobs held by their parents and grandparents. Job export, deskilling, and increased use of illegal immigrants have all been used to replace the loss of cheap, docile Black labor (Braverman 1974; Gordon et al. 1982; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983). The large numbers of undereducated, unemployed African-Americans, most of whom are women and children, who inhabit inner cities cannot be forced to work. From the standpoint of the dominant group, they no longer represent cheap labor but instead signify a costly threat to political and economic stability.

Controlling Black women's fertility in such a political economy becomes important. The image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not white and middle class. A closer look at this controlling image reveals that it shares some important features with its mammy and matriarch counterparts. Like the matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled a bad mother. But unlike the matriarch, she is not too aggressive—on the contrary, she is not aggressive enough. While the matriarch's unavailability contributed to

her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. The image of the welfare mother represents another failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become "de mule uh de world."

The image of the welfare mother provides ideological justifications for interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. African-Americans can be racially stereotyped as being lazy by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic. Moreover, the welfare mother has no male authority figure to assist her. Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought: she is a woman alone. As a result, her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage. Finally, in the post–World War II political economy, one of every three African-American families is officially classified as poor. With such high levels of Black poverty, welfare state policies supporting poor Black mothers and their children have become increasingly expensive. Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African-American communities shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves. The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children (Davis 1981).

The fourth controlling image—the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression. The image of Jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez's words, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99). Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women (Davis 1981; Hooks 1981; D. White 1985). Yet Jezebel served another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field or "wet nurse" white children, slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.

The fourth image of the sexually denigrated Black woman is the foundation underlying elite white male conceptualizations of the mammy, matriarch, and welfare mother. Connecting all three is the common theme of Black women's sexuality. Each image transmits clear messages about the proper links among female sexuality, fertility, and Black women's roles in the political economy. For example, the mammy, the only somewhat positive figure, is a desexed individual. The mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for white men. She is asexual and therefore is free to become a surrogate mother to the children she acquired not through her own sexuality. The mammy represents the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought. In contrast, both the matriarch and the welfare mother are sexual beings. But their sexuality is linked to their fertility, and this link forms one fundamental reason they are negative images. The matriarch represents the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized. Similarly, the welfare mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, factors identified as the cause of her impoverished state. In both cases Black female control over sexuality and fertility is conceptualized as antithetical to elite white male interests.

Taken together, these four prevailing interpretations of Black womanhood form a nexus of elite white male interpretations of Black female sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression, they provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies.

CONTROLLING IMAGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: COLOR, HAIR TEXTURE, AND STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

Like everyone else, African-American women learn the meaning of race, gender, and social class without obvious teaching or conscious learning. The controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the Other persists. Particular meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression (Omi and Winant 1986, 63).

African-American women encounter this ideology through a range of unquestioned, daily experiences. But when the contradictions between Black women's self-definitions and everyday treatment are heightened, controlling images become increasingly visible. Karen Russell, the daughter of basketball great Bill Russell, describes how racial stereotypes affect her:

> How am I supposed to react to well-meaning, good, liberal white people who say things like: "You know, Karen, I don't understand what all the fuss is about. You're one of my good friends, and I never think of you as black." Implicit in such a remark is, "I think of you as white," or perhaps just, "I don't think of your race at all." (Russell 1987, 22).

Ms. Russell was perceptive enough to see that remarks intended to compliment her actually insulted African-Americans. As the Others, African-Americans are assigned all of the negative characteristics opposite and inferior to those reserved for whites. By claiming that Ms. Russell is not really "black," her friends unintentionally validate this system of racial meanings and encourage her to internalize those images.

Although Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with whites, Black men, and one another. Dealing with issues of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one concrete example of how controlling images denigrate African-American women. A children's rhyme often sung in Black communities proclaims:

> Now, if you're white you're all right,
> If you're brown, stick around,
> But if you're black, Git back! Git back! Git back!

Externally defined standards of beauty long applied to African-American women claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or "beautiful" a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must "git back." Blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.

Race, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Judging white women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their white skin and straight hair privilege them in a system in which part of the basic definition of whiteness is its superiority to blackness. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are men, their self-definitions are not as heavily dependent on

their physical attractiveness as those of all women. But African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to externally defined standards of beauty—standards applied to us by white men, white women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another.

Exploring how externally defined standards of beauty affect Black women's self-images, our relationships with one another, and our relationships with Black men has been one recurring theme in Black feminist thought.[3] The long-standing attention of musicians, writers, and artists to this theme reveals African-American women's deep feelings concerning skin color, hair texture, and standards of beauty. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou records her painful realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white:

> Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? . . . Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother . . . had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Angelou 1969, 2).

Gwendolyn Brooks also explores the meaning of skin color and hair texture for Black women. During Brooks's childhood, having African features was so universally denigrated that she writes, "when I was a child, it did not occur to me even once, that the black in which I was encased . . . would be considered, one day, beautiful" (Brooks 1972, 37). Early on Brooks learned that a clear pecking order existed among African-Americans, one based on one's closeness to whiteness. As a member of the "Lesser Blacks," those farthest from white, Brooks saw first-hand the difference in treatment of her group and the "Brights":

> One of the first "world"-truths revealed to me when I at last became a member of SCHOOL was that, to be socially successful, a little girl must be Bright (of skin). It was better if your hair was curly, too—or at least Good Grade (Good Grade implied, usually, no involvement with the Hot Comb)—but Bright you marvelously *needed* to be. (1972, 37)

This division of African-Americans into two categories—the "Brights" and the "Lesser Blacks"—affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women differently. Darker women face being judged inferior and receiving the treatment afforded "too-big Negro girls with nappy hair." Institutions controlled by whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks,

discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject white images of beauty. Sonia Sanchez reports, "sisters tell me today that when they go out for jobs they straighten their hair because if they go in with their hair natural or braided, they probably won't get the job" (Tate 1983, 141).

Sometimes the pain most deeply felt is the pain that Black women inflict on one another. Marita Golden's mother told her not to play in the sun because "you gonna have to get a light husband anyway, for the sake of your children" (1983, 24). In *Color*, a short film exploring the impact of skin color on Black women's lives, the dark-skinned character's mother tries to get her to sit still for the hot comb, asking "don't you want your hair flowing like your friend Rebecca's?" We see the sadness of a young Black girl sitting in a kitchen, holding her ears so they won't get burned by the hot comb that will straighten her hair. Her mother cannot make her beautiful, only "presentable" for church. Marita Golden's description of a Black beauty salon depicts the internalized oppression that some African-American women feel about African features:

> Between customers, twirling in her chair, white-stockinged legs crossed, my beautician lamented to the hairdresser in the next stall, "I sure hope that Gloria Johnson don't come in here asking for me today. I swear 'fore God her hair is this long." She snapped her fingers to indicate the length. Contempt riding her words, she lit a cigarette and finished, "Barely enough to wash, let alone press and curl." (Golden 1983, 25)

African-American women who are members of the "Brights" fare little better, for they too receive special treatment because of their skin color and hair texture. Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved light-skinned woman, was sexually haarassed because she was "beautiful," for a Black woman. Her straight hair and fair skin, her appearance as a dusky white woman, made her physically attractive to white men. But the fact that she was Black, and thus part of a group of sexually denigrated women, made her available to white men as no group of white women had been. In describing her situation, Jacobs notes, "if God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Washington 1987, 17).

This difference in treatment of dark-skinned and light-skinned Black women creates issues in relationships among African-American women. Toni Morrison's (1970) novel *The Bluest Eye* explores this theme of the tension that can exist among Black women grappling with the meaning of externally defined standards of beauty. Frieda, a dark-skinned, "ordinary" Black girl, struggles with the meaning of these standards. She wonders

why adults always got so upset when she rejected the white dolls they gave her and why light-skinned Maureen Peal, a child her own age whose two braids hung like "lynch-ropes down her back," got the love and attention of teachers, adults, and Black boys alike. Morrison explores Freida's attempt not to blame Maureen for the benefits her light skin and long hair afforded her as part of Freida's growing realization that the "Thing" to fear was not Maureen herself but the "Thing" that made Maureen beautiful.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1953) captures the anger and frustration experienced by dark-skinned women in dealing with the differential treatment they and their lighter-skinned sisters receive. In her novel *Maud Martha*, the dark-skinned heroine ponders actions she could take against a red-headed Black woman whom her husband found so attractive. "I could," considered Maud Martha, "go over there and scratch her upsweep down. I could spit on her back. I could scream. 'Listen,' I could scream, 'I'm making a baby for this man and I mean to do it in peace.'" (Washington 1987, 422). But Maud Martha rejects these actions, reasoning "if the root was sour what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?"

This "sour root" also creates issues in relationships between African-American women and men. Maude Martha explains:

> It's my color that makes him mad. I try to shut my eyes to that, but it's no good. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. (Washington 1987, 421)

Her husband's attraction to light-skinned women hurt Maude Martha because his inability to "jump away up high" over the wall of color limited his ability to see her for who she truly was.

ISSUES MERITING FURTHER ATTENTION IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Black Women's Reactions to Controlling Images

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny eloquently expresses her standpoint on Black womanhood: "Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dream of whut a woman oughta be and do. But nothing can't stop you from wishin! You can't beat nobody down so low

till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither" (Hurston 1937, 17). Like many African-American women, she resisted the controlling images of "work-ox" and "brood-sow," but her status as a slave prevented her fulfilling her "dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do." She saw the constraints on her own life but managed to keep the will to resist alive. Moreover, she tried to pass on that vision of freedom from controlling images to her granddaughter.

Despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African-American women have resisted these ideological justifications for our oppression (Gilkes 1983b). Unlike white women who "face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power," and for whom "there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools," Black women are offered no such possibility (Lorde 1984, 117–18). One theme that merits continued analysis in Black feminist thought—especially by Black feminist sociologists, historians, and psychologists—concerns documenting and explaining Black women's diverse reactions to being objectified as the Other.

Literature by Black women writers provides the most comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African-American women experience internalized oppression is a prominent theme in Black women's writing. Mary Helen Washington's (1982) discussion of the theme of the suspended woman in Black women's literature describes one dimension of Black women's internalized oppression. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives. They are suspended in time and place: their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed. Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, "ugly" eleven-year-old Black girl in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), internalizes the denigrated images of African-American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her "ugliness." Pecola cannot value her Blackness—she longs to be white so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, typifies the internalization of the mammy image. Pauline Breedlove neglects her own children, preferring to lavish her concern and attention on the white charges in her care. Only by accepting this subordinate role to white children could she, as a poor Black woman, see a positive place for herself.

Black women writers have chronicled other forms of Black women's attempts to escape from a world predicated upon denigrated images of Black womanhood. Fictional African-American women characters use drugs, alcohol, excessive religion, and even retreat into madness in an

attempt to create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful Black female realities. Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Mrs. Hill in *Meridian* (Walker 1976) both demonstrate an attachment to religion that allows them to ignore their daughters. Eva Medina in Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1976), and Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) all experience madness as an escape from pain.

Denial is another characteristic response to the controlling images of Black womanhood and their accompanying conditions. By claiming that they are not like the rest, some African-American women reject connections to other Black women and demand special treatment for themselves. Mary Helen Washington (1982) refers to these characters as assimilated women. They are more aware of their condition than are suspended women, but in spite of their greater potential for shaping their lives, they still feel thwarted because they see themselves as misplaced by time and circumstances. Light-skinned, middle class Cleo, a key figure in Dorothy West's novel *The Living is Easy* (1948), typifies this response. In one scene strong-willed Cleo hustles her daughter past a playground filled with the children of newly arrived southern Blacks, observing that "she wouldn't want her child to go to school with those niggers." Cleo clings to her social class position, one that she sees as separating her from other African-Americans, and tries to muffle the negative status attached to her Blackness by emphasizing her allegedly superior class position. Even though Cleo is more acceptable to the white world, the price she pays for her acceptance is the negation of her racial identity and separation from the sustenance that such an identity might offer.

Black women writers not only portray the range of responses that individual African-American women express concerning their objectification as the Other: they also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions. The personal growth experienced by Renay, the heroine in Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974), illustrates the process of rejecting externally defined controlling images of Black womanhood. Shockley initially presents Renay as a suspended woman who is trapped in a heterosexual marriage to an abusive husband and who tries to deny her feelings for other women. Renay retreats into music and alcohol as temporary spaces where she can escape having her difference—in this case, her Blackness and lesbianism—judged as inferior and deviant. After taking a white woman lover, Renay is initially quite happy, but she grows to realize that she has replaced one set of controlling images—namely, those she experienced with her abusive husband—with another. She leaves her lover to pursue her own self-definition. By the novel's end Renay has begun

to resist all external definitions of herself that stem from controlling images applied to Blacks, women, and lesbians.

Renay's experiences typify how Black women writers explore the theme of Black women's resistance to these denigrated images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman in Black women's literature. Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986) describes a Black slave woman's emerging sense of power after she participates in a slave revolt, runs away, and eventually secures her own freedom. Dorine Davis, the heroine in Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983), is raped at age ten by her white employer, subsequently sleeps with men for money, yet retains a core of resistance. Bad things happen to Dorine, but Guy does not portray Dorine as a victim. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison presents the character of Claudia, a ten-year-old Black girl who, to the chagrin of grownups, destroys white dolls by tearing off their heads and who refuses to share her classmates' admiration of light-skinned, long-haired Maureen Peal. Claudia's growing awareness of the "Thing that made her [Maureen Peal] beautiful and us ugly" and her rejection of that Thing—racist images of Black women—represents yet another reaction to negative images of Black womanhood. Like Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Timeless Place, the Chosen People*, Vyry in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), or Meridian in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Claudia represents a young version of emergent Black women carving out new definitions of Black womanhood.

Institutional Sites for Transmitting Controlling Images

Schools, the media, corporations, and government agencies are essential sites for transmitting ideologies objectifying Black woman as the Other. These institutions are not controlled by African-Americans and are clearly the source of and ultimate beneficiaries of these externally defined controlling images.

Confronting the controlling images forwarded by institutions external to African-American communities should continue as a fundamental concern of Black feminist thought. But this effort should not obscure the equally important issue of examining how African-American institutions also perpetuate notions of Black women as the Other. Although it may be painful to examine—especially in the context of a racially charged society always vigilant for signs of African-American disunity—the question of the role of Black institutions as transmitters of controlling images of Black womanhood merits investigation.

Some Black women are becoming increasingly vocal in describing what they see as sexism in African-American communities (Wallace 1978; Hooks

1981; White 1984). Black feminist Pauline Terrelonge is one of the few Black women who has directly confronted the issue of the Black community's role in the subordination of Black women. Terrelonge asks, "if there is much in the objective condition of black women that warrants the development of a black feminist consciousness, why have so many black women failed to recognize the patterns of sexism that directly impinge on their everyday lives? (1984, 562). To answer this question, Terrelonge contends that a common view within African-American communities is that African-Americans have withstood the long line of abuses perpetuated against us mainly because of Black women's "fortitude, inner wisdom, and sheer ability to survive." Connected to this emphasis on the moral, spiritual, and emotional strength of Black women is the related argument that African-American women play critical roles in keeping Black families together and in supporting Black men. These activities have been important in offsetting the potential annihilation of African-Americans as a "race." As a result, "many blacks regard the role of uniting all blacks to be the primary duty of the black woman, one that should supersede all other roles that she might want to perform, and certainly one that is essentially incompatible with her own individual liberation" (p. 557).

Institutions controlled by African-Americans can be seen as contradictory locations where Black women learn skills of independence and self-reliance which enable African-American families, churches, and civic organizations to endure. But these same institutions may also be locations where Black women learn to subordinate our interests as women to the allegedly greater good of the larger African-American community. Some Black feminist activists claim that relegating Black women to more submissive, supporting roles in African-American organizations has been an obstacle to Black political empowerment. In describing the 1960s nationalist movement, Pauli Murray contends that many Black men misinterpreted Black women's qualities of self-reliance and independence by tacitly accepting the matriarchy thesis. Such a stance was and is highly problematic for Black women. Murray observes, "the black militant's cry for the retrieval of black manhood suggests an acceptance of this stereotype, an association of masculinity with male dominance and a tendency to treat the values of self-reliance and independence as purely masculine traits" (1970, 89).

Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) sees Black women's subordination in African-American institutions as a continuing concern. For Radford-Hill the erosion of Black women's traditional power bases in African-American communities which followed nationalist movements is problematic in that "Black macho constituted a betrayal by black men; a psychosexual rejection of black women experienced as the capstone to our fall from cultural

power. . . . Without the power to influence the purpose and direction of our collective experience, without the power to influence our culture from within, we are increasingly immobilized, unable to integrate self and role identities" (p. 168).

Evelyn Brooks (1983) and Jacquelyn Grant (1982) identify the church as one key institution whose centrality to Black community development may have come at the expense of many of the African-American women who constitute the bulk of its membership. Grant asserts, "it is often said that women are the 'backbone' of the church. On the surface, this may appear to be a compliment. . . . It has become apparent to me that most of the ministers who use this term are referring to location rather than function. What they really mean is that women are in the 'background' and should be kept there" (1982, 141).

In their goal of dispelling the myths about African-American women and making Black women acceptable to wider society, some historically Black colleges may also foster Black women's subordination. In *Meridian* Alice Walker describes an elite college for Black women where "most of the students—timid, imitative, bright enough but never daring, were being ushered nearer to Ladyhood every day" (1976, 39). Confined to campus, Meridian, the heroine, had to leave to find the ordinary Black people who exhibited all of the qualities that her elite institution wished to eliminate. Walker's description of the fence surrounding the campus symbolizes how perpetuating the cult of true womanhood was stultifying for Black students. But it also describes the problems African-American institutions create for Black women when they embrace externally defined controlling images:

> The fence that surrounded the campus was hardly noticeable from the street and appeared, from the outside, to be more of an attempt at ornamentation than an effort to contain or exclude. Only the students who lived on campus learned, often painfully, that the beauty of a fence is no guarantee that it will not keep one penned in as securely as one that is ugly. (Walker 1976, 41)

African-American families form another potential location where the objectification of Black women as the Other occurs. Whereas white feminists have actively explored how white, middle-class families perpetuate their subordination (see, for example, Chodorow 1978; Chodorow and Contratto 1982), Black women intellectuals have been less vocal. How do African-American women experience internalized oppression in our families? What is the role of fathers and mothers in this process? We are finally hearing the long hidden stories of those strong Black women whose families truly model cultures of resistance and teach their daughters how to resist (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987). But, with the exception of Black

women's fiction, stories expressing the full pain of those Black girls whose mothers, fathers, and significant others told them they were ugly, stupid, or generally undesirable remain largely untold. "It is not that black women have not been and are not strong," maintains Bell Hooks. "It is simply that this is only a part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension—one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to" (1989, 153).

Constructing an Afrocentric Feminist Aesthetic for Beauty

Developing much-needed redefinitions of beauty must involve the critical first step of learning to see African-American women who have classical African features as being capable of beauty. Lorraine Hansberry describes this need for a changed consciousness about African-American women's beauty:

> Sometimes in this country maybe just walking down a Southside street . . . Or maybe suddenly up in a Harlem window . . . Or maybe in a flash turning the page of one of those picture books from the South you will see it—*Beauty* . . . stark and full. . . . No *part* of this—but rather Africa, simply Africa. These thighs and arms and flying winged cheekbones, these hallowed eyes—without negation or apology. *A classical people demand a classical art.* (Hansberry 1969, 106)

But proclaiming Black women "beautiful" and white women "ugly" merely replaces one set of controlling images with another and fails to challenge how Eurocentric masculinist aesthetics foster an ideology of domination. Current standards require either/or dichotomous thinking: in order for one individual to be judged beautiful, another individual—the Other—must be deemed ugly. Accepting this underlying assumption avoids a more basic question concerning the connections among controlling images, either/or dichotomous thinking, and unequal power relationships among groups. Creating an alternative feminist aesthetic involves deconstructing and rejecting existing standards or ornamental beauty that objectify women and judge us by our physical appearance. Such an aesthetic would also reject standards of beauty that commodify women by measuring various quantities of beauty that women broker in the marital marketplace.

African-American women can draw on traditional Afrocentric 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), quiltmaking offers a suggestive model for an Afrocentric

feminist aesthetic (Brown 1989). African-American women quiltmakers 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). In describing Alice Walker's reaction to a quilt done by an anonymous Black woman, Barbara Christian notes that Walker "brings together . . . the theme of the black woman's creativity, her transformation, despite opposition, of the bits and pieces allowed to her by society into a work of functional beauty" (Christian 1985, 86).

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. The Afrocentric notions of diversity in community and functional beauty potentially heal many of the oppositional dichotomies inherent in Western social thought. From an Afrocentric perspective, 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. Using such criteria, no individual is inherently beautiful because beauty is not a state of being. Instead beauty is always defined in a context as a state of becoming. All African-American women as well as all humans become capable of beauty.

NOTES

1. Dona Richards (1980) offers an insightful analysis of the relationship between Christianity's contributions to an ideology of domination and the culture/nature dichotomy. She notes that European Christianity is predicated on a worldview that sustains the exploitation of nature: "Christian thought provides a view of man, nature, and the

universe which supports not only the ascendancy of science, but of the technical order, individualism, and relentless progress. Emphasis within this world view is placed on humanity's dominance over *all* other beings, which become 'objects' in an 'objectified' universe. There is no emphasis on an awe-inspiring God or cosmos. Being 'made in God's image,' given the European ethos, translates into 'acting *as* God,' recreating the universe. Humanity is separated from nature" (p. 69).

2. Brittan and Maynard (1984) note that ideology (1) is common sense and obvious; (2) appears natural, inevitable, and universal; (3) shapes lived experience and behavior; (4) is sedimented in people's consciousness; and (5) consists of a system of ideas embedded in the social system as a whole. This example captures all dimensions of how racism and sexism function ideologically. The status of Black woman as servant is so "common sense" that even a child knows it. That the child saw a Black female child as a baby maid speaks to the naturalization dimension and to the persistence of controlling images in individual consciousness and the social system overall.

3. While Black women intellectuals have described how these standards affect Black women's relationships, less attention has been given to how skin color, hair texture, and other types of physical markers are used in maintaining systems of oppression. Hair texture and skin color may intersect with gender in structuring systems of oppression. In his exhaustive cross-cultural analysis of slavery, Orlando Patterson notes that dominant groups usually perform elaborate rituals on their subordinates. Shearing of hair is a key part of rituals of domination cross-culturally. But Patterson points out, "it was not so much color differences as differences in hair type that become critical as a mark of servility in the Americas" (1982, 61). To explain this pattern, Patterson contends that hair provides a clearer and more powerful badge of status. Differences between whites and Blacks were sharper in hair quality than in color and persist much longer with miscegenation. Patterson notes, "Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols, it was disguised . . . by the linguistic device of using the term 'black,' which nominally threw the emphasis to color" (p. 61).

4. Studies of African art and culture indicate that behavior, individuals, and creations deemed "beautiful" from an Afrocentric perspective are valued for qualities other than their appearance and their value in an exchange-based marketplace (Gayle 1971; Asante 1990). For example, the Yoruba assess everything aesthetically, from the taste of food and the qualities of dress to the deportment of a woman or man. Beauty is seen in the mean—in something not too tall or short, not too beautiful (overhandsome people turn out to be skeletons in disguise in many folktales) or too ugly. Moreover, the Yoruba appreciate freshness and improvisation in the arts (Thompson 1983).

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

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Empowerment

Perspectives on Gender, Volume 2

Patricia Hill Collins

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