Black Feminist Thought:

Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment

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Part I: The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought

Chapter 1: The Politics of Black Feminist Thought

Maria Stewart was one of the first U.S. Black Feminists in a time when one metaphor to symbolize the subordination of Black women was the very pots and kettles they utilized often for their chores.   
The author claims that the intellectual traditions begun by Maria Stewart and others were suppressed by dominant groups and were in obscurity up until now. However, despite the suppression, U.S. Black Women have overcome their obstacles and have managed to do intellectual work, and to create meaningful dialogue about contributing to intellectual members of the community like Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooer, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, and others. African women such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have raised important issues that affect Black African women. “This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women’s ideas and our intellectual activism in the face that suppression constitutes the politics of U.S. Black Feminist Thought. More important, understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how U.S. Black Feminist thought—its core themes, epistemological significance, and connection to domestic and transnational Black feminist practice—is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist.

The Suppression of Black Feminist Thought

The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression. Oppression describes an unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States. African-American women’s oppression has encompassed 3 (three) interdependent dimensions. 1. Exploitation of Black Women’s labor---iron pots and kettles to symbolize Black women’s ghettoizaiton in service occupations and few opportunities to engage in intellectual work. 2. Political dimension of denying women rights and privileges extended to white males (right to vote, hold public office). 3. The controlling images applied to Black women to maintain the stranglehold over them by the dominant group. By attaching unpopular and unattractive descriptive adjectives such as mammies, jezebels, ad Aunt Jemimas, prostitutes or welfare mothers unable or undesiring of getting off to uphold the unpleasant descriptive of Black women is unfair and these stereotypes have caused unnecessary pain and anguish associated with the Black Women’s oppression. Within Black Civil society, the increasing visibility of Black women’s ideas did not go unnoticed.

Black Feminist Thought as Critical Social Theory

The purpose of Black Women’s collective thought or social theories emerging from and/or on behalf or U.S. Black women aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. U.S. African-American social and political thought analyzes institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it. Feminism advocates women’s emancipation and empowerment. Other critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such a thought arises because African American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. There are 2 factors that stimulate U.S. Black women’s critical social theory----1. Prior to WWI—racial segregation in urban housing became so entrenched that the majority of African-American women lived in self-contained Black neighborhoods, where their children attended Black schools, in Black churches, etc. Confining the Blacks to segregated areas subjected them to a distinctive language or dialect, religion, and community politics that as a group was markedly different from the dominant group-the whites. 2. The common experiences the black women gained from their jobs. Most of the black women worked on domestic duties. It allowed black women to see white elites, thus demystifying the work and the relationship to the white family as omnipotent. By working for the white man, the Black women certainly saw the contradictions between what they saw of the white man’s actions and what they said should be in terms of race relations, etc. Other contradictions included if women are passive and fragile as some suggest, then why are Black women considered “mules.” And if good mothers are supposed to stay at home with their children, when why are Black women on public assistance forced to find jobs, and leave their kids in daycare.

Developing Black Feminist Thought

Starting from the assumption that African-American women have created independent, oppositional, yet subjugated knowledge concerning our own subordination, contemporary U.S. Black women intellectuals are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African-American women. Central to this enterprise is reclaiming Black Feminist intellectual traditions as a result of the fact that in the past their relatives were not permitted to make any contributions. New intellectuals became popular such as, Marilyn Richardson, Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Not all black women feminists were intellectuals, middle class, as well as so-called second class citizens like Sojourner Truth who merely looked to exploit the weaknesses of the dominant groups over the subjugations of the Blacks. Reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks is another dimension of developing Black feminist thought. (page 14) Barbara Christian’s landmark volume on Black women writers, Mary Helen Washington’s ’87 reassessment of anger and voice in Maud Martha, by Gwendolyn Brooks and Hazel Carby’s use of the lens of race, class, and gender to reinterpret the works of nineteenth century Black women novelists. Developing Black feminist Thought also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations among women who are commonly perceived as intellectuals. Instead, all U.S. Black women who contribute to Black feminist thought as critical social theory are deemed to be “intellectuals.” They may or may not be intellectuals. Sojourner Truth is not an “intellectual,” yet, she is a Black feminist thinker. “ain’t I a woman.” (page 15). Her life as a second class citizen has been filled with hard physical labor, with no assistance from men. Look at her contradictions and deconstruct the events of her life to ascertain her contributions as a “woman” Black woman, and “intellectual.”

Clarifying Black women’s experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black feminist thought, interpreting them requires collaborative leadership among those who participate in the diverse forms that Black women’s communities now take. Developing Black feminist thought as critical social theory involves including the ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals---many of whom may be working-class women with jobs outside academia—as well as those ideas emanating from more formal, legitimated scholarship. **The ideas we share with one another as mothers in extended families, as othermothers in Black communities, as members of Black churches, and as teachers to the Black community’s children have formed one area where African-American women have hammered out a multifaceted Black women’s standpoint. Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists constitute another group from which Black women intellectuals have emerged.**

**OBJECTIVES OF THIS VOLUME**

**There are 4 basic components of Black feminist thought (Bft)—its thematic content, its interpretive frameworks, its epistemological approaches, and its significance for empowerment—constitute the core of this volume.**

1. **Author Patricia Collins aims to summarize core themes in Black feminist thought by surveying their historical and contemporary expression. Primarily U.S. Black Women thinkers.**
2. **Using and furthering an interpretive framework or paradigm that has come to be known as race, class, and gender studies constitute a second objective of Black feminist thought.---there are different dimensions of an interconnected relationship with terms such as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and matrix of domination. Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, example: intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation.**
3. **3rd objective to develop an epistemological framework that can be used both to assess existing Black feminist thought and to clarify some of the underlying assumptions that impede its development. What criteria determine Black and/or feminist? Etc. what essential features does Black feminist thought share with other critical social theories, particulary Western feminist theory, Afrocentric theory, Marxist analyses, and postmodernism?**
4. **Collins aims to further Black feminist thought’s contributions to empowering African-American Women. Empowerment remains an elusive construct and developing a Black feminist politics of empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted. Ideally, Black feminist thought contributes ideas and analytical frameworks toward this end. Moreover, it is important to remember that Black women’s full empowerment can occur only**

**within a transnational context of social justice. While focused on U.S. Black women, U.S. Black feminism constitutes one of many social justice projects dedicated to fostering the empowerment of groups within an overarching context of justice. In this sense, Black feminist thought constitutes one part of a much larger social justice project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women.**

**CHAPTER 2: DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT (p. 21-46)**

**U.S. Black Feminist Thought encompasses diverse and often contradictory meanings. Defining their terms proved to be difficult to say the least. The pejorative meanings of feminist and Black took turns in discrediting those who tried to overcome oppression. Despite the difficulties, finding some sort of common ground for thinking through the boundaries of Black feminist thought remains important because as Pearl Cleage said, “we have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges.” (Cleage 1993, 55). Therefore, the author set out to explain six (6) distinguishing features about Black feminist thought that can be held as similar without the quandary of definitions.**

**Why U.S. Black Feminist Thought? (page 22)--because U.S. women constitute an oppressed group. As a collectivity, U.S. Black women participate in a dialectical relationship, linking African-American women’s oppression and activism.**

**Dialectical relationships of this sort mean that two parties are opposed and opposite. Black women’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender. Sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed. As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppression. Since Black women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions themselves are eliminated. Black feminist thought support broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women’s particular needs. Groups organized around race, class, and gender sexuality and citizenship status in and of themselves are not inherently a problem. However, when African-Americans, poor people, women, and other groups discriminated against see little hope for group-based advancement, this situation constitutes social injustice. We encounter racism in everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction (St. Jean and Feagin 1998) Most Black women do not have the opportunity to befriend White women and men as neighbors, nor do their children attend school with White children. Racial segregation remains a fundamental feature of the U.S. landscape; leaving many African-Americans with the belief the more things change the more they stay the same.” (Collins 1998a 11-43). U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. There is a connection between experience and consciousness that shapes everyday lives of individual African-American women. This connection is continuously being conveyed by journalists and authors. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, (page 24). Sociologist Joyce Ladner, Zora Neale Hurston, Overall, these ties between what one does and what one thinks illustrated by individual Black women can also characterize Black women’s experiences and ideas as a group. Historically, racial segregation in housing, education and employment fostered group commonalities that encouraged the formation of a group-based collective standpoint.**

**Diverse Responses to Common Challenges within Black Feminism (page 25) A second distinguishing feature of U.S. Black feminist thought emerges from a tension linking experiences and ideas. On the one hand, all African-American women face similar challenges that result I living in a society that derogates women of African descent. On the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women’s group knowledge or standpoint. Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, religion, and region, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment and hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women’s intelligence, work habits, and sexuality. These common challenges in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members. Not every individual Black woman consumer need experiences followed in a store as a potential shoplifter, ignored while others are waited on first at a restaurant, etc., for African-American women as a collectivity to recognize that differential group treatment is operating. Since standpoints refer to group knowledge, recurring patterns of differential treatment such as these suggest that certain themes will characterize U.S. Black women’s group knowledge or standpoint. For example, one core theme concerns multifaceted legacies of struggle, especially in the forms of violence that accompany intersecting oppressions (Collins 1998d). Katie Cannon observes,”Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other Black, exploited and oppressed.” Black women’s vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, at home, and in media representations has been one factor fostering this legacy of struggle. This legacy of struggle constitutes one of several core themes of a Black women’s standpoint. Efforts to reclaim U.S. Black women’s intellectual traditions have revealed Black women’s long standing attention to additional core themes first recorded by Maria W. Stewart. Stewart’s perspective on intersecting oppressions, her call for replacing derogated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, her belief in Black women’s activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and her sensitivity for sexual politics are all core themes advanced by a variety of Black feminist intellectuals. Despite the common challenges confronting African-American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion. The existence of core themes does not mean they respond to these themes in the same way. For example, when faced with controlling images of Black women as being ugly and unfeminine,---such as Sojourner Truth----demand, “ain’t I a woman?” others internalize the controlling images as they see fit to survive. Others aim to transgress the boundaries that frame the controlling images. Many factors explain these diverse responses to the controlling images. Primarily, it is just overwhelming. The 2nd second factor that influences African-American women’s varying responses to common challenges is sexuality. Black lesbian have identifies heterosexism as a form of oppression and the issues they face living in the homophobic communities as shaping their interpretations of everyday events. In a similar fashion varying ethnic and citizenship statuses within the United States nation-state as well shape differences among Black women in the U.S Black Puerto Rican women thus must negotiate a distinctive set of experiences that accrue to being racially Black, holding a special form of American citizenship, and being ethnically Latino.**

**Black Feminist Practice and Black Feminist Thought (page 29)**

**A 3rd third distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns the connections between U.S. Black women’s e experiences as a heterogeneous (mixed) collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint. One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are suppressed is that self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance. On an individual level one’s actions illustrates the connections among the lived experiences with oppression, developing one’s own point of view concerning those experiences, and acts of resistance that can follow (a Black girl during Jim crow laws- cleaning segregated bathrooms had to clean the White person’s toilet in plain view closest to her, but if she had to go herself, she had to walk nearly a half a mile around the building down the stairs into a filthy pigsty---oppression!) -- After a while she said to herself—oh no!! I am going to use this toilet for the Whites---she used the act of resistance. As members of an oppressed group, U.S. Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledges that have been designed to foster U.S. Black women’s group empowerment. Unlike the dialectical relationship (which linked oppression and activism); this was a dialogical relationship ---which characterized Black women’s collective experiences and group knowledge. For U.S. Black women as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another. A dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changes in actions, and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. Within this collective experience Black women acted in concert with the common history and destiny of Black solidarity. The belief that Blacks have common interest and should support one another has long permeated Black women’s political philosophy. Through the process of Rearticulation, Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of ourselves and our worlds. By taking the core themes of a Black women’s standpoint and infusing them with new meaning. Black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s every day, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance.**

**Dialogical Practices and Black Women Intellectuals**

**A 4th fourth distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought concerns the essential contributions of African-American women intellectuals. The existence of a Black women’s standpoint does not mean that African-American women, academic or otherwise, appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catylist for social change. Very different kinds of thought and theories emerge when abstract thought is joined with pragmatic action. Denied positions as scholars and writers, exemplify this tradition of merging intellectual work and activism. Black women who were denied formal educations, for form of their activism as well as the content of the ideas they developed differed from those of the middle class black women. The live performances of classic Black women blues singers in the 1920’s can be seen as one important arena where working-class women gathered and shared ideas especially germane to them (Davis 1998). There is a special relationship of Black women intellectuals to the community of African-American women parallels the existence of 2 interrelated levels of knowledge. First, the commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday lives and actions. And two: the experts or specialists who participate in and emerge from a group a more specialized type of knowledge. Whether working-class or not, everyday or famous, the range of Black women have greater access to education, However it illustrates a tradition of ongoing scholarship and activism.Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought for several reasons: first; our experiences as African-American women provide us with a unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood unavailable to other groups, should we choose to embrace it. Second; Black women intellectuals are less likely to walk away from the struggle. Third; Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment. Fourth; Black women intellectuals are central in the production of Black feminist thought because we alone can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups.**

**Black Feminism as Dynamic and Changing (page 39)**

**A fifth 5th distinguishing feature of U.S. Black Feminist Thought concerns the significance of change. In order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be Static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them. Ms. Nelson realizes that those who control school curricula, television programs, government statistics, and the press typically prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others. The changing social conditions that confront African-American women stimulate the need fror new Black feminist Analyses of the common differences that characterize U.S. Black Womanhood. There are three caveats about the future to be careful. First: individual thinkers should not be in isolation. Two, let some express their views in the background, not everyone has to speak. And three, not allow some “superstars” to become narcissistic. They were powerful by the efforts of others, don’t forget it.**

**A Final distinguishing feature of Black Feminist thought concerns its relationship to other projects for social justice. Black women’s intellectual struggles are part of a larger struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice. Political office etc. The words and actions of these diverse Black women intellectuals may address markedly different audiences. Yet, in their commitment to Black women’s empowerment within a context of social justice, they advance the strikingly similar theme of the oneness of all human life.**

**PART II: CORE THEMES IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT**

**Chapter 3 Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression**

**One core theme in U.S. Black feminist thought consist of analyzing Black women’s work especially Black women’s labor market victimization as “mules.” As dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery. Black feminist analysis of Black women’s work emphasize two (2) themes. One: how Black women’s paid work is organized within intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender. Historically, they made it out of domestic work. Two: concerns how Black women’s unpaid family labor as mother at home is simultaneously confining and empowering.**

**FAMILY AND WORK: CHALLENGING THE DEFINITIONS (page 47);**

**Traditional definition of family supported and sponsored by government policy is a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife and mother, and children, idealizing the traditional family as a private haven from a public world, family is seen as being held together through primary emotional bonds of love and caring, sexual division of labor, wherein women’s roles are defined as primarily in the home with the men’s in the public world of work, the traditional family ideal also assumes the separation of work and family. Defined as a natural or biological arrangement based on a heterosexual attraction instead this monolithic family type is state sanctioned, heterosexual marriage that confers legitimacy not only on the family structure itself but on children born in this family. In general, everything the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African-American families are NOT. Two (2) elements of this IDEAL are PEOBLEMATIC; 1—assumed split between public of paid employment and paid sphere of unpaid family responsibilities without pay has never worked out for U.S. Black women. 2—African-Americans suffer from deficient ideas concerning gender, particularly when describing Black women as “unfeminine” if they are fulfilling their duties within the household and working outside the home. However, instead of trying to describe Blacks or Black women within the confines of this ideal definition, the author suggests that we used a different way of describing how Black women are living and working. May Madison, a participant in John Gwaltney’s study of inner-city African-Americans, alludes to the difference between work as an instrument and work as something for self. Ms. Madison’s perspective criticizes definitions of work that grant White men more status and human worth because they are employed in better-paid occupations. Ms. Madison recognizes that work is a contested construct and that evaluating the worth by the type of work performed is a questionable practice based on race and gender inequality. Work might be better conceptualized by examining the range of work that African-American women actually perform. Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening, the type of work long associated with Black women’s status as “mule.” Alienated labor can be paid—the case of Black women in domestic service, those Black women working as dishwashers, dry-cleaning assistants, cooks, and health-care assistants, as well as some professional Black women engaged in corporate mammy work.**

What is the connection between U.S. Black women’s work both in the labor market and iun the African-American family networks? **Addressing this questions for four (4) KEY HISTORICAL PERIODS in Black political economy uses this broader understanding of Black women’s work to further Black feminist analyses of U.S.**

**Black women’s oppression. 1. Enslavement 2. Free Labor 3. Urbanization 4. Post World War II. CONNECTION BET/W BLACK WOMEN’S WORK AND A.-A. FAMILY NETWORKS.**

**THE PROCESS OF ENSLAVEMENT**

**During the shift to industrialization in the early 19th century, most Whites of all social classes and citizenship categories had the legal right to maintain families and to work for pay. In contrast, the majority of African-Americans were enslaved, no citizenship rights--Africans were property. And one way that many resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery was by re-creating the African notions of family as extended kin units. (Webber 1978; Sobol 1979). Bloodlines carefully monitored in West African societies were replaced whereby enslaved Africans drew upon notions of family to redefine themselves as part of a Black community consisting of their enslaved “brothers and sisters” (Gutman 1976). The slave community stood in opposition to a White male-controlled public sphere of the capitalist political economy. Prior to U.S. enslavement and African colonization, women in African societies apparently combined work and family without seeing much conflict between the two. The women could work and take care of their children simultaneously (similar to some working women in the U.S. today). For African women enslaved in. the United States, these basic ides concerning work, family, and motherhood were retained, yet changed by two fundamental demands of enslavement. 1. Enslaved women benefited their owners. 2. Nature of the work was altered, their forced incorporation into a capitalist political economy as slaves meant that West African women became economically exploited, politically powerless units of labor. They worked the same duties as men or as the owner wanted them to do.**

**THE TRANSITION TO FREE LABOR**

**Because of Plessy v. Ferguson and for at least 75 years after emancipation, Black women workers in the South worked in the fields with the male head of the extended family, or domestic work. Work for both occupations was not much different than under slavery.**

**URBANIZATION AND DOMESTIC WORK**

**Plessy separated Black society from the Whites. In the Black communities gender relations within the Black civil society separated men from women. Male space included the streets, barber shops, and pool halls; female arenas consisted of households and churches. “Women, who blurred the physical boundaries of gender, did so at the jeopardy of respectability within their communities” (Higginbotham 1989, 59). Urbanization meant migration out of agriculture work and into domestic work for African-American women. One benefit of urbanization was that it allowed Black domestic workers to shift the conditions of their work from those of live-in servant to day work. Domestic work in the Northern cities were economically exploited. Some described it as a slave market. The negative aspect of the day time job aspect versus the live-in caretaker domestic was the relationship between Black women and employers. Urbanization meant impersonal relations. Also, the employers wanted the women to act more submissive and servile. Domestics had to refer to employers as sir and ma’am as also wear uniforms to as “physical markers” to show others their place in society. The use of space was a major device in structuring deference behaviors as well. Domestics were confined to a certain area of the house only, usually the kitchen. In the South, some women retain jobs in manufacturing. Whatever their jobs or where they lived U.S. Black women were able to work day shift and then go home and take care of the family.**

**BLACK WOMEN’S WORK AND POST-WORLD WAR II POLITICAL ECONOMY**

**As long as African-Americans lived in self-contained albeit racially segregated urban neighborhoods, Black community institutions aided U.S. Blacks in responding to changes in wider society. After 1945, a changing global economy in conjunction with the emergence of a new postcolonial, transnational context fostered significant shifts in Black civil society. Black activism developed. From the end of the war to the mid-1970’s U.S. Blacks as a collectivity acquired unprecedented access to education, housing, and jobs, long denied under legal segregation. U.S. Blacks unified to form several organizations. As a result other laws designed to deal with certain injustices against discrimination were passed. This political change led to the Black civil society becoming more stratified by social class. The sizable working class expanded upward for many Blacks. Many Blacks experienced social mobility into the Black middle class. However, due to others who were not fortunate to find jobs, the Blacks were also representative of a lower class. In addition, Crack coaine led to Black underclass developing in many urban areas.**

**Just Holding On: Working Class Black Women**

**A crucial factor in contemporary African-American civil society is not simply Black men’s marginalization from work but changes affecting Black women’s paid and unpaid work (Brewer 193). First change is Black women’s movement form domestic service to industrial and clerical work. The second is Black women’s integration into the international division of labor in low-paid service work, which does not provide sufficient income to support a family.**

**The New Working Poor: Black Single Mothers**

**On average, one-third of Black women and men who find employment work in jobs characterized by low wages, job instability, and poor working conditions. These jobs are increasing rapidly, but they are in places not where Blacks live. Moreover, they don’t pay like the manufacturing jobs that the Blacks once had in the urban area close to home.**

**The employment vulnerability of working class blacks in post WW II political economy, the relative employment equality of poor Black women and men had gender specific patters of dependence on the informal economy. All have implications for U.S. Black women who find themselves among the working poor. One effect has been the increase of the families maintained by Black single mothers. There is a post-world war II trend that accelerated after 1960 that is part of changes in African American community structures overall: The communal child-care networks of the slave era, the extended family arrangements of the rural south, and the cooperative family networks of the prior eras of the Black urban migrations have eroded. These shifts portend major problems for African-American women and point to a continuation of Black women’s oppression, but structured through new instititional arrangements. There is a threadbare, overstretched Black extended family system where Black mothers could not support the emotional needs of their daughters. In the absence of support, teenagers got pregnant and decided to keep their babies. Just at a point in life when young Black girls most needed affection, many felt unloved by their mothers, ignored by their schools, and rejected by their fathers and boyfriends. The girls’mothers had their own needs. Often in poor health, anxious, distracted, and generally worn down by the struggle to raise their families in harsh urban neighborhoods, mothers routinely saw their daughters’ pregnancies as one more responsibility for them to bear.**

**Middle Class Black Women ( Page 64)**

**On all three dimensions of middle-class power---economic, political and ideological—the Black middle class differs from its White counterpart. Persistent racial discriminations means that Black middle class women and men are less economically secure. The Whites are ambivalent about their function as “CONTROLLERS OF WORKING CLASS EMPLOYEES, NAMELY BLACKS.**

**Black feminist Barbara Omolade’s (1994) three tiered Black female work site not only explores the needs of the clerks and clients, it points to the new demands placed on Black women professionals. These women’s work involves a new version of “mammification” one where the legacy of Black women’swork in domestic service weaves itself into the very fabric of professional jobs. (Elizabeth Higginbothan, 1994) notes that Black women professionals are disproportionately employed in the government sector, making them especially vulnerable to political changes such as downsizing of the 1980’s. Moreover, this work resembles mamification care of the personal needs of the destitute and the weak in public institutions. When asked, they would be expected to quell the disturbing fellow natives. When compared to Black men, U.S. Black women have lower paying jobs in any area of the private sector and many areas of the government sector.**

**Black Feminist Questions**

**In prior era African-Americans were considered “mules” of the world. At the 21st work still matters, but is organized via social class formations that often place working-class and middle-class women in new uncharted territories. Large numbers of working poor Black women are employed as cooks, laundry, workers, nursing home aides, and child-care workers. Far too many Black single mothers living in inner-city neighborhoods remain isolated and encounter middle class Black women primarily as police officers, social workers, teachers, or on television. How will these working-class Black women, many of whom feel stuck in the working poor, view their more privileged sisters? Contemporary middle-class Black women seem to have a choice. Will they continue to value Black solidarity with their working-class sisters, even if creating that solidarity might place them at odds with their proscribed mammification duties? Or will they see their newly acquired positions as theirs alone and thus perpetuate working-class Black women’s subordination?**

***CHAPTER 4: MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, AND OTHER CONTROLLING IMAGES***

**Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. 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. Portraying African-American**

**women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought. Elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas or symbols about Black womanhood. These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.The Objectification of Black Women as the Other**

**Maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression. Another basic idea concerning**

**Black women is how their objectification is central the process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking (white/black, male/female, fact/opinion, etc.,), one element is objectified as the other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. Domination involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. Making Black women work as though they were “mules of the world” represents one form of objectification. The foundations of intersecting oppressions become grounded in interdependent concepts of binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectifictation, and social hierarchy. With domination, based on difference, forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority andinferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.**

**Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression**

**The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed, controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination. According to the cult of TRUE WOMANHOOD there were four cardinal virtues girls aspired to when becoming women; piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. However, unlike the White women, the**

**African-American women encountered a DIFFERENT SET OF CONTROLLING IMAGES: mammy, unfeminine matriarchs, welfare mother, unfeminine Black Lady, Jezebel or hoochie.**

1. **First controlling image applied to U.S. Black women—MAMMY-faithful, obedient, domestic servant. Created to justify economic exploitation of house slaves. Dominant Whites claim that the Black women use all of their time to take good care of the White children and other family duties in the White household better than she does in her own house.**
2. **Unfeminine Matriarch—female headed households in African-American communities, This symbol represents the “bad” Black mother (whereas the mammy was deemed the “good Black mother). The matriarch failed the fulfill her duties at home and, as a result, it led to social problems in Black civil society. Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their children’s failure at school. Also, as overly aggressive women, they emasculated their lovers. From the dominant group’s perspective the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to the African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant. These mothers who worked so hard to achieve a modicum of middle class respectability felt cheated when their daughters became pregnant during their teenage years.**
3. **The welfare mother is the 3rd controlling image. Constitutes a class-specific controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law. African-Americans successfully acquired political and economic protections from a greatly expanded social welfare state. Job export, de-skilling and increased use of immigrants have all been used to replace the cheap, docile labor force that U.S. Blacks used to be. Until the 1990’s, the large numbers of undereducated, unemployed African-American**
4. **ghettoized in U.S. inner cities, most of whom were women and children, could not be forced to work. This surplus population no longer represented cheap labor but instead, produced instability. Many men turned form legitimate jobs to drugs, specifically, crack cocaine. The controlling image sees the Black Woman 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 a “mule of the world.” Media images in 1980’s during the Reagan administration blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests, and symbols of what was wrong with America. In contrast to the welfare mother who draws upon the moral capital attached to American motherhood, the welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic domineering, and manless working-class Black woman.**
5. **The 4th controlling image in the Black Lady, referring to the middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women. These women stayed in school, worked hard and have achieved much. Yet the image of the Black lady builds upon prior images of Black womanhood in many ways. Similar to matriarch—no time for family. Job is time consuming. These Black ladies take jobs that should go to more worthy Whites, especially U.S. White men. Given the political climate of the 1990’s, these U.S. Black Ladies were examples of reverse racism.**
6. **The final controlling image is the jezebel or “hoochie.” Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary “hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality. Black women bashing in new rap songs take this injustice to new heights.**

**Sexuality is a theme that runs throughout each of these controlling images as well. For example, the Black matriarch is depicted by the dominant group as**

**an asexual because she assumes her role is to get ahead at her job and nothing more. Page 84 has other depictions of the other controlling images.**

**Controlling Images and Social Institutions.**

**Schools, media, and government agencies constitute important sites for reproducing these controlling images. Popular culture has become increasingly important as well in promoting these controlling images.**

**Color, Hair, Texture, and Standards of Beauty (page 88)**

**The controlling images of Black woman are not simply grafted onto existed 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 intersecting oppression. These objectifications as the Other are powerful. Being blue-eyed, blond, thin, and White could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black Women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.**

**Race, gender and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black women cannot escape a system that elevates Whites. Controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted. Even within the U.S. Black women there were competing images toward Whiteness.**

**Black Women’s Reactions to Controlling Images. (Page 93)**

**Given the ubiquitous nature of controlling images, it should not be surprising that exploring how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in Black Feminist Thought. Overall, despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African-American women as a group have resisted these**

**ideological justifications for our oppression (Holloway 1995). Unlike White women, Black women are offered fewer possibilities. U.S. Black women have demonstrated diverse reactions to their treatment. Understanding the contours of this heterogeneity (mixed), and how U.S. Black women can be better equipped to resist this negative treatment, constitutes one 1 important task for U.S. Black feminist thought. Literature has helped Black women resist the pain as well. It also chronicled other forms of Black women’s attempts to escape from a world predicated upon derogated images of Black womanhood. Denial is another characteristic response to the controlling images. By claiming that they are not like the rest, some African-American women reject connection with other Black women and demand special treatment, while they become assimilated into the White society. Positive self image is another reaction of some Black women to the controlling images. Other responses through writers are that some women reject one controlling image to be placed with another. Indeed, Black women writers explored the theme of Black women’s resistance to these controlling images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman in Black women’s literature. Independent Black women herines populate U.S. women’s fiction of the 1990’s, expressing diverse dimensions of emergent woman thesis. Upward Social class mobility, overcoming economic hardships, freedom after the male protagonists absenteeism, new relationsips with male counterparts, new friendships with other Black women in the same predicaments lead to several novels that depict Black women as stable. The many documentaries and geature films where Black women appear as central characters constitute another arena where emergent Black women appear. Emergent women have found the one way of surviving that everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to “turn it out.”**

***CHAPTER 5: THE POWER OF SELF-DEFINITION (PAGES 97-121)***

**Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous have long existed. These workers have retained a “remarkable sense of “self-worth.” In 1905, a period of heightened racial repression, educator Fannie Barrier Williams viewed the African-American woman not as a defenseless victim but as a strong-willed resister.” Williams saw the Black woman as irrepressible. “She is insulted, but she holds up her head, she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect…The most interesting girl of this country is the colored girl.” (Williams, p. 151) Resisting by doing something that “is not expected” could not have occurred without Black women’s long-standing rejection of mammies, matriarchs and other controlling images. (Richardson 1987, 30).**

**How have African-American women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectificationas “de mule uh de world.” How do we accound for the voices of resistance of Audre Lorde, Ella Surrey, Maria Stewart, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Marita Bonner? What foundation sustained Sojourner Truth so that she could ask, “Ain’t I a woman?” The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group derived Black women’s standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival. Finding a Voice: Coming to Terms with Contridictions.The overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women’s standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought. Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African-American women is not surprising. Black women’s lilves are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for them and one for ourselves (Gwaltney 1980, 240) creates a peculiar tension to construct independent self-definition within a context where Black womanhood remains routinely derogated. Much of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a collective, self-defined voice and express a fully articulated womanist standpoint. For U.S. Black women constructed knowledge of self emerges form the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival.**

**Safe Spaces and Coming to Voice (page 100)**

**While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic (preponderant influence, esp. one nation over another) as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. Extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur.—they also form prime locations for resisting objectifications as the Other. By advancing Black women’s empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African-American institutions. Schools, media, and government agencies reproduce the controlling images of Black womanhood. In response, African-American women have traditionally used family networks and Black community institutions as sites for countering these images.**

**Black Women’s Relationships with One Another**

**Traditionally, U.S. Black Women’s efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred inat least 3 safe spaces. 1. Black women’s relationships with one another. Informal, private dealilngs among individuals. In others, Black churches, or in Black women’s organizations where they affirm one another. The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship where mothers pass on everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women, the right to exist. In literature this is also a prevailing theme.**

**The Black Women’s Blues Tradition—African-American music as art has provided a second 2nd location where Black women have comer to voice (Jackson, 1981). Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge,” suggests Angela Davis (1989, 200). “Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom.” (1989, 201). Spirituals, Blues,, jazz, rhythm and blues, and progressive hip-hop all fomr part of a continuum of struggle which is at once aesthetic and political.**

**The Voices of Black Women Writers : Since the 1970’s the increased literacy among African-Americans has provided new opportunities for U.S. Black women to expand the use of scholarship and literature into more visible institutional sites of resistance. A community of Black women writers has emerged since 1970, one in which African-American women engage in dialogue among one another in order to explore formerly taboo subjects. Black feminist criticism has documented the intellectual and personal space (the 3rd space) created for African-American woman in this emerging body of ideas. ( Washington, 1980, 1982; Tate 1983; Evans 1984; Christian 1985; O’Neale 1986).**

**How “Safe” are Safe Spaces?**

**Historically, these were safe spaces because only Black women interacted. Since the 1970’s, U.S. Black women have been unevenly incorporated into schools, jobs, neighborhoods, and other U.S. social institutions that have historically excluded them. As a result, African-American woman have been class stratified. In these newly desegregated settings, a new challenge for U.S. Black women was to find new “safe spaces” that do not become stigmatized as separatist. As Black women are increasingly integrated into new social arenas, they are nonetheless subject to new and oftentimes not-so-subtle forms of discrimination. In response, these Black women urgently need to respond to these injustices, as they did in the past. Contemporary African-American musicians, writers, cultural critics, and intellectuals function in a dramatically different political economy than that of any prior generation. The author believes that it remains to be seen whether the specialized thought generated by contemporary Black feminist thinkers in very different institutional locations is capable of creating safe spaces that will carry African-American women even further.**

**Consciousness as a Sphere of Freedom.**

**Traditionally, when taken together, Black women’s relationship with one another, the Black women’s blues tradition, and the work of Black women writers provided the context for crafting alternatives to prevailing images of Black womanhood. These sites offered safe spaces that nurtured the everyday and specialized thought of African-American women. In them Black women intellectuals could construct ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new meanings. These new meanings offered African-American women powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood.**

**The Importance of Self-Definition**

**When Black women’s very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definition becomes essential to that survival. The issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the “free mind” of a self-defined, womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of U.S. Black women writers. It is the self in relationship with an intimate other, with the community, the nation and the world. (in Tate, 1983, 54). This placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships. The affirmation of self is often the only solution to the problem or situation. The affirmation of self in Blues make a critical contribution in understanding this; The assertion of individuality and the implied assertion—as action, not merely verbal statement of self is an important dimension of the blues;this affirmation usually comes at the end of the song, after the description or analysis of the troubling situation. (Nina Simone is one of many blues singers who exemplifies this concept). Other ways of taking the journey in order to find the freedom from racial oppression involve “the transformation of silence into language and action (Lorde 1984, page 40). Typically ties to children and/or community, fictional Black women characters, especially prior to the 1990’s, search for self-definition within close geographical boundaries. Even though physical limitations confine the Black heroine’s quest to a specific area, forming complex relationships adds depth to her identity quest in lieu of geographical breadth. (Tate 1983, xxi). In their search for self-definition and the power of the free mind, Black heroines may remain “motionless on the outside…but inside?” Given the physical limitations on Black woman’s mobility, the conceptualization of self that has been part of Black women’s self-definitions is distinctive. SELF is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of the family and community—As Paule Marshall describes it, “the ability to recognize one’s continuity with the larger community.” (washington 1984, 159). By being accountable to others, Black women become more human, less objectified selves. This journey toward self-definition has political significance. Black women who struggle to “forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them….are aware and conscious. Identity is not the goal, but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition. In the process Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In their journey, the Black women must be cognizant that they are acutely aware of the power of the controlling images, not only controlling images of degree, but of kind. There are still subtle ways for the dominant group to spread the controlling images of U.S. Black women. The images remain to dehumanize and control them.**

**Self-Valuation and Respect (page 114):--Self-definition refers to power dynamics in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood. In contrast, Black women’s self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions. The controlling images are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of Black women’s behavior that threaten existing power arrangements. (Gilkes, 1983a; D. White 1985). The emphasis that Black feminist thinkers have placed on respect illustrates the significance of self-valuation—IN a society in which no one is obliged to respect African-American women, we have admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others. Black women voices from a variety of sources reflect this demand for respect. Katie G. Cannon (1988)suggests that Black womanist ethics embraces three basic dimensions: “ INVISIBLE DIGNITY, QUIET GRACE, AND UNSTATED COURAGE,” all qualities essential for self-valuation and self-respect. Women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves. The right to be Black and female and respected pervades everyday conversations among African-American women. Many U.S. Black women have earned the right to deem it necessary to declare toward the dominant group, “I’m just as good as anybody.” (Simonsen 1986, 132).**

**Self-Reliance and Independence**

**In her 1831 essay Black feminist thinker Maria Stewart not only encouraged Black women’s self-definition and self-valuations but linked Black women’s self-reliance with issues of survival. Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American woman have “possessed the spirit of independence,” have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another the value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity. (Steady 1987). The linking of economic self-sufficiency as one critical dimensioin of self-reliance with the demand for respect permeates Black feminist thought.**

**Self, Change, and Personal Empowerment**

**The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 1984, 112). In this passage Lorde explaore how independent self-definitions empower Black women to bring about social change. By struggling for self-defined womanist perspectives that reject the master’s images, African-American women change themselves. A critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness can in turn foster Black women’s collective empowerment. A changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their leves.**