

Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface*

BLACK FEMINISM is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black. To attempt to open dialogue between Black women and Black men by attacking Black feminists seems shortsighted and self-defeating. Yet this is what Robert Staples, Black sociologist, has done in *The Black Scholar*.

Despite our recent economic gains, Black women are still the lowest paid group in the nation by sex and race. This gives some idea of the inequity from which we started. In Staples' own words, Black women in 1979 only "threaten to overtake black men" [*italics mine*] by the "next century" in education, occupation, and income. In other words, the inequity is self-evident; but how is it justifiable?

Black feminists speak as women because we are women and do not need others to speak for us. It is for Black men to speak up and tell us why and how their manhood is so threatened that Black women should be the prime targets of their justifiable rage. What correct analysis of this capitalist dragon within which we live can legitimize the rape of Black women by Black men?

At least Black feminists and other Black women have begun this much-needed dialogue, however bitter our words. At least

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we are not mowing down our brothers in the street, or bludgeoning them to death with hammers. Yet. We recognize the fallacies of separatist solutions.

Staples pleads his cause by saying capitalism has left the Black man only his penis for fulfillment, and a "curious rage." Is this rage any more legitimate than the rage of Black women? And why are Black women supposed to absorb that male rage in silence? Why isn't that male rage turned upon those forces which limit his fulfillment, namely capitalism? Staples sees in Ntozake Shange's play *For Colored Girls* "a collective appetite for black male blood." Yet it is my female children and my Black sisters who lie bleeding all around me, victims of the appetites of our brothers.

Into what theoretical analysis would Staples fit Patricia Cowan? She answered an ad in Detroit for a Black actress to audition in a play called *Hammer*. As she acted out an argument scene, watched by the playwright's brother and her four-year-old son, the Black male playwright picked up a sledgehammer and bludgeoned her to death. Will Staples' "compassion for misguided black men" bring this young mother back, or make her senseless death more acceptable?

Black men's feelings of cancellation, their grievances, and their fear of vulnerability must be talked about, but not by Black women when it is at the expense of our own "curious rage."

If this society ascribes roles to Black men which they are not allowed to fulfill, is it Black women who must bend and alter our lives to compensate, or is it society that needs changing? And why should Black men accept these roles as correct ones, or anything other than a narcotic promise encouraging acceptance of other facets of their own oppression?

One tool of the Great-American-Double-Think is to blame the victim for victimization: Black people are said to invite lynching by not knowing our place; Black women are said to invite rape and murder and abuse by not being submissive enough, or by being too seductive, or too . . .

Staples' "fact" that Black women get their sense of fulfillment from having children is only a fact when stated out of the

mouths of Black men, and any Black person in this country, even a "happily married" woman who has "no pent-up frustrations that need release" (!) is either a fool or insane. This smacks of the oldest sexist canard of all time, that all a woman needs to "keep her quiet" is a "good man." File that one alongside "Some of my best friends are . . ."

Instead of beginning the much-needed dialogue between Black men and Black women, Staples retreats to a defensive stance reminiscent of white liberals of the 60s, many of whom saw any statement of Black pride and self-assertion as an automatic threat to their own identity and an attempt to wipe them out. Here we have an intelligent Black man believing – or at least saying – that any call to Black women to love ourselves (and no one said *only*) is a denial of, or threat to, his Black male identity!

In this country, Black women traditionally have had compassion for everybody else except ourselves. We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers. History and popular culture, as well as our personal lives, are full of tales of Black women who had "compassion for misguided black men." Our scarred, broken, battered and dead daughters and sisters are a mute testament to that reality. We need to learn to have care and compassion for ourselves, also.

In the light of what Black women often willingly sacrifice for our children and our men, this is a much needed exhortation, no matter what illegitimate use the white media makes of it. This call for self-value and self-love is quite different from narcissism, as Staples must certainly realize. Narcissism comes not out of self-love but out of self-hatred.

The lack of a reasonable and articulate Black male viewpoint on these questions is not the responsibility of Black women. We have too often been expected to be all things to all people and speak everyone else's position but our very own. Black men are not so passive that they must have Black women speak for them. Even my fourteen-year-old son knows that. Black men themselves must examine and articulate their own desires and positions and stand by the conclusions thereof. No point is

served by a Black male professional who merely whines at the absence of his viewpoint in Black women's work. Oppressors always expect the oppressed to extend to them the understanding so lacking in themselves.

For Staples to suggest, for instance, that Black men leave their families as a form of male protest against female decision making in the home is in direct contradiction to his own observations in "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy."*

Now I am sure there are still some Black men who marry white women because they feel a white woman can better fit the model of "femininity" set forth in this country. But for Staples to justify that act using the reason it occurs, and take Black women to task for it, is not only another error in reasoning; it is like justifying the actions of a lemming who follows its companions over the cliff to sure death. Because it happens does not mean it should happen, nor that it is functional for the well-being of the individual nor the group.

It is not the destiny of Black America to repeat white America's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If Black men continue to define "femininity" instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism.

As Black women and men, we cannot hope to begin dialogue by denying the oppressive nature of male privilege. And if Black males choose to assume that privilege for whatever reason — raping, brutalizing, and killing Black women — then ignoring these acts of Black male oppression within our communities can only serve our destroyers. One oppression does not justify another.

It has been said that Black men cannot be denied their personal choice of the woman who meets their need to dominate. In that case, Black women also cannot be denied our personal choices, and those choices are becoming increasingly self-assertive and female-oriented.

* "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy" by Robert Staples in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 1, no. 3-4 (January-February 1970).

As a people, we most certainly must work together. It would be shortsighted to believe that Black men alone are to blame for the above situations in a society dominated by white male privilege. But the Black male consciousness must be raised to the realization that sexism and woman-hating are critically dysfunctional to his liberation as a Black man because they arise out of the same constellation that engenders racism and homophobia. Until that consciousness is developed, Black men will view sexism and the destruction of Black women as tangential to Black liberation rather than as central to that struggle. So long as this occurs, we will never be able to embark upon that dialogue between Black women and Black men that is so essential to our survival as a people. This continued blindness between us can only serve the oppressive system within which we live.

Men avoid women's observations by accusing us of being too "visceral." But no amount of understanding the roots of Black woman-hating will bring back Patricia Cowan, nor mute her family's loss. Pain is very visceral; particularly to the people who are hurting. As the poet Mary McAnnally said, "Pain teaches us to take our fingers OUT the fucking fire."*

If the problems of Black women are only derivatives of a larger contradiction between capital and labor, then so is racism, and both must be fought by all of us. The capitalist structure is a many-headed monster. I might add here that in no socialist country that I have visited have I found an absence of racism or of sexism, so the eradication of both of these diseases seems to involve more than the abolition of capitalism as an institution.

No reasonable Black man can possibly condone the rape and slaughter of Black women by Black men as a fitting response to capitalist oppression. And destruction of Black women by Black men clearly cuts across all class lines.

Whatever the "structural underpinnings" (Staples) for sexism in the Black community may be, it is obviously Black women who are bearing the brunt of that sexism, and so it is in our best interest to abolish it. We invite our Black brothers to join us,

* From *We Will Make A River*, poems by Mary McAnnally (West End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979), p. 27.

since ultimately that abolition is in their best interests also. For Black men are also diminished by a sexism which robs them of meaningful connections to Black women and our struggles. Since it is Black women who are being abused, however, and since it is our female blood that is being shed, it is for Black women to decide whether or not sexism in the Black community is pathological. And we do not approach that discussion theoretically. Those "creative relationships" which Staples speaks about within the Black community are almost invariably those which operate to the benefit of Black males, given the Black male/female ratio and the implied power balance within a supply and demand situation. Polygamy is seen as "creative," but a lesbian relationship is not. This is much the same as how the "creative relationships" between master and slave were always those benefiting the master.

The results of woman-hating in the Black community are tragedies which diminish all Black people. These acts must be seen in the context of a systematic devaluation of Black women within this society. It is within this context that we become approved and acceptable targets for Black male rage, so acceptable that even a Black male social scientist condones and excuses this depersonalizing abuse.

This abuse is no longer acceptable to Black women in the name of solidarity, nor of Black liberation. Any dialogue between Black women and Black men must begin there, no matter where it ends.

**ZAMI
SISTER OUTSIDER
UNDERSONG**

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