


5 THE POWER OF SELF- DEFINITION



In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers,” asserts Black feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984, 114). This “watching” generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women “become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (p. 114), while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups. Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: “We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We’ve always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves” (Gwaltney 1980, 238, 240).¹

Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed (Davis 1981, 1989; Terborg-Penn 1986; Hine 1989; Barnett 1993). Despite the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins (1985) asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have retained a “remarkable sense of self-worth.” They “skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, these attempts to lure them into accepting employers’ definitions of them as inferior” (p. 212). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988a) found that the domestic workers in her study refused to let their employers push them around. As one respondent declared: “When I went out to work . . . my mother told me, ‘Don’t let anybody take advantage of you. Speak up for your rights, but do the work right. If they don’t give you your rights, you demand that they treat you right. And if they don’t, then you quit’ ” (p. 41). Jacqueline Bobo (1995) reports that the U.S. Black women in her study who viewed the film *The Color Purple* were not passive consumers of controlling images of Black womanhood. Instead, these women crafted identities designed

to empower them. 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: “As meanly as she is thought of, hindered as she is in all directions, she is always doing something of merit and credit that is not expected of her” (Williams 1987, 151). 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” (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. When combined, these individual acts of resistance suggest that a distinctive, collective Black women’s consciousness exists. Such a consciousness was present in Maria Stewart’s 1831 speech advising the “daughters of Africa” to “Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties” (Richardson 1987, 30). Such a consciousness is present in the worldview of Johnny Mae Fields, a mill worker from North Carolina possessing few opportunities to resist. Ms. Fields wryly announces, “If they tell me something and I know I ain’t going to do it, I don’t tell them. I just go on and don’t do it” (Byerly 1986, 141).

Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women’s consciousness. In 1925 author Marita Bonner cogently described how consciousness remained the one sphere of freedom available to her in the stifling confines of both her Black middle-class world and a racist White society:

So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing. . . . Motionless on the outside. But inside? (Bonner 1987, 7)

U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the “inside” ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. How have African-American women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectification as “de mule uh de world”? How do we account 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.

“A system of oppression,” claims Black feminist activist Pauli Murray, “draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness” (1987, 106). U.S. Black women’s ideas and actions force a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, the notion that Black women’s objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression. Most African-American women simply do not define themselves as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. The matrix of domination in which these controlling images are embedded is much less cohesive or uniform than imagined.

African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas designed to provide meaning in our daily lives (Scott 1985). Black women’s work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible. Seeing the contradictions in the ideologies opens them up for demystification. Just as Sojourner Truth deconstructed the term *woman* by using her own lived experiences to challenge it, so in a variety of ways do everyday African-American women do the same thing. That fewer Maria Stewarts, Sojourner Truths, Ella Surreys, or Johnny Mae Fieldses are heard from may be less a statement about the existence of Black women’s ideas than it is a reflection of the suppression of their ideas. As Nancy White, an inner-city resident points out, “I like to say what I think. But I don’t do that much because most people don’t care what I think” (Gwaltney 1980, 156). Like Marita Bonner, far too many Black women remain motionless on the outside . . . but inside?

Finding a Voice: Coming to Terms with Contradictions

“To be able to use the range of one’s voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of [Black women] writers,” maintains Black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian (1985, 172). African-American women have certainly expressed our individual voices. U.S. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in Black civil society. But despite this tradition, 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 lives 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-definitions within a context where Black womanhood remains routinely derogated. As Karla Holloway points out, “the reality of racism and sexism means that we must configure our private realities to include an awareness of what our public image might mean to others. This is not paranoia. It is preparedness” (Holloway 1995, 36).

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 (Collins 1998, 61–65). Audre Lorde observes that “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism” (1984, 42). Lorde also points out that the “visibility which makes us most vulnerable”—that which accompanies being Black—“is also the source of our greatest strength” (p. 42). The category of “Black woman” makes all U.S. Black women especially visible and open to the objectification of Black women as a category. This group treatment potentially renders each individual African-American woman invisible as fully human. But paradoxically, being treated as an invisible Other places U.S. Black women in an outsider-within position that has stimulated creativity in many.

For individual women, resolving contradictions of this magnitude takes considerable inner strength. In describing the development of her own racial identity, Pauli Murray remembers: “My own self-esteem was elusive and difficult to sustain. I was not entirely free from the prevalent idea that I must prove myself worthy of the rights that white individuals took for granted. This psychological conditioning along with fear had reduced my capacity for resistance to racial injustice” (1987, 106). Murray’s quest was for constructed knowledge (Belenky et al. 1986), a type of knowledge essential to resolving contradictions. To learn to speak in a “unique and authentic voice, women must ‘jump outside’ the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame” (p. 134). Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class White women, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance. For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival.²

Safe Spaces and Coming to Voice

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance. Extended families, churches, and African-American

community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. Sondra O’Neale describes the workings of these Black women’s spaces: “Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the black women’s community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy . . .—by doing the things that ‘normal’ black women do” (1986, 139). These spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other. In these spaces Black women “observe the feminine images of the ‘larger’ culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community” (O’Neale 1986, 139). 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.

These institutional sites where Black women construct independent self-definitions reflect the dialectical nature of oppression and activism. Schools, print and broadcast media, government agencies, and other institutions in the information business 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. On the one hand, these Black community institutions have been vitally important in developing strategies of resistance. In the context of deep-seated U.S. racial segregation that persisted through the 1960s, the vast majority of U.S. Black women lacked access to other forms of political organization.

On the other hand, many of these same institutions of Black civil society have also perpetuated racist, sexist, elitist, and homophobic ideologies. This same period of desegregation of U.S. society overall spurred a parallel desegregation *within* Black civil society where women, working-class folks, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered individuals, and other formerly subjugated subpopulations within Black civil society began to speak out.

As a result of this changing political context, the resulting reality is much more complex than one of an all-powerful White majority objectifying Black women with a unified U.S. Black community staunchly challenging these external assaults. No uniform, homogeneous culture of resistance ever existed among U.S. Blacks, and such a culture does not exist now. One can say, however, that U.S. Blacks have shared a common political agenda and culture, one that has been differently experienced and expressed by U.S. Blacks as a heterogeneous collectivity. Historically, survival depended on sticking together and in many ways aiming to minimize differences among African-Americans. More recently, in a changing political economy where survival for many U.S. Blacks seems less of an issue, space to express these differences now exists. Black feminism itself has been central in creating that space, in large part, via Black women’s claims for

self-definition. Overall, African-American women find ourselves in a web of crosscutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and Black women's self-definitions.

Thus, the historical complexity of these institutional arrangements of racial segregation and heterogeneous Black community politics profoundly affected Black women's consciousness and its articulation in a self-defined standpoint. Given this context, what have been some important safe spaces where Black women's consciousness has been nurtured? Where have individual African-American women spoken freely in contributing to a collective, self-defined standpoint? Moreover, how "safe" are these spaces now?

Black Women's Relationships with One Another

Traditionally, U.S. Black women's efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in at least three safe spaces. One location involves Black women's relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals. In others, as was the case during slavery (D. White 1985), in Black churches (Gilkes 1985; Higginbotham 1993), or in Black women's organizations (Giddings 1988; Cole 1993; Guy-Sheftall 1993), more formal organizational ties have nurtured powerful Black women's communities. As mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another (Myers 1980).

The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987). Black daughters identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives (Bell-Scott et al. 1991). Mothers and mother figures emerge as central figures in autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Bebe Moore Campbell's *Sweet Summer* (1989), Mamie Garvin Fields and Karen Fields's *Lemon Swamp and Other Places* (1983), and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992). Alice Walker attributes the trust she has in herself to her mother. In describing this relationship, Mary Helen Washington points out that Walker "never doubted her powers of judgment because her mother assumed that they were sound; she never questioned her right to follow her intellectual bent, because her mother implicitly entitled her to it" (Washington 1984, 145). By giving her daughter a library card, Walker's mother showed she knew the value of a free mind.

In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist. Black women's fiction, such as Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Johnson Girls" (1981) and Toni Morrison's nov-

els *Sula* (1974), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Beloved* (1987), as well as Terry McMillan's blockbuster novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), is one important location where Black women's friendships are taken seriously. In a dialogue with four other Black women, Evelyn Hammonds describes this special relationship that Black women can have with one another: "I think most of the time you have to be there to experience it. When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world" (Clarke et al. 1983, 114).

This shared recognition often operates among African-American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood. Marita Golden describes her efforts in 1968 to attend a college which was "nestled . . . in the comfortable upper reaches of northwest Washington, surrounded by . . . the manicured, sprawling lawns of the city's upper class." To enter this world, Golden caught the bus downtown with "black women domestic workers who rode to the end of the line to clean house for young and middle-aged white matrons." Golden describes her fellow travelers' reaction to her acquiring a college education:

They gazed proudly at me, nodding at the books in my lap. . . . I accepted their encouragement and hated America for never allowing them to be selfish or greedy, to feel the steel-hard bite of ambition. . . . They had parlayed their anger, brilliantly shaped it into a soft armor of survival. The spirit of those women sat with me in every class I took. (Golden 1983, 21)

My decision to pursue my doctorate was stimulated by a similar experience. In 1978 I offered a seminar as part of a national summer institute for teachers and other school personnel. After my Chicago workshop, an older Black woman participant whispered to me, "Honey, I'm real proud of you. Some folks don't want to see you up there [in the front of the classroom], but you belong there. Go back to school and get your Ph.D., and then they won't be able to tell you nothing!" To this day, I thank her and try to do the same for others. In talking with other African-American women, I have discovered that many of us have had similar experiences.

This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives. Identifying the value of Black women's friendships, Karla Holloway describes how the women in her book club supported one another: "The events we shared among ourselves all had a similar trigger—it was when someone, a child's school principal or teacher, a store clerk, medical personnel, had treated us as if we had no sense of our own, no ability to filter through whatever nonsense they were feeding us, or no earned, adult power to make choices in our children's lives" (Holloway 1995, 31). These women described cathartic moments when, in creative ways, they responded to these assaults by "turning it out." Each knew that only another Black woman could fully understand how it felt to be treated that

way and to respond in kind.

Audre Lorde describes the importance that the expression of individual voice within collective context of Black women's communities can have for self-affirmation: "Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (1984, 42). One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one's voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection. For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will?

Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women's relationships with one another. Mary Helen Washington points out that one distinguishing feature of Black women's literature is that it is about African-American women. Women talk to one another, and "their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being" (1987, xxi). The significance placed on relationships among Black women transcends U.S. Black women's writings. For example, Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes* (1991) uses the friendship between two African professional women to explore the challenges facing professional women in contemporary African societies. Within U.S. Black women's fiction, this emphasis on Black women's relationships has been so striking that novelist Gayl Jones suggests that women writers select different themes from those of their male counterparts. In the work of many Black male writers, the significant relationships are those that involve confrontation with individuals outside the family and community. But among Black women writers, relationships within family and community, between men and women, and among women are treated as complex and significant (Tate 1983, 92).

U.S. Black women writers and filmmakers have explored many themes affecting Black women's relationships. One concerns the difficulties that African-American women can have in affirming one another in a society that derogates Black women as a group. Albeit for different reasons, the inability of mothers to help their daughters come to understandings of Black womanhood characterize mother-daughter relationships in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* and in the film *Just Another Girl on the IRT*. Another theme concerns how Black women's relationships can support and renew. Relationships such as those between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, among sisters in the film *Soul Food*, among the four women in *Waiting to Exhale*, and among women in an extended family in the film *Daughters of Dust* all provide cases where Black women helped one another grow in some fashion. Another theme involves how relationships among Black women can control and repress. Audre Lorde's relationship with her mother in her autobiography *Zami* (1982) and Black adolescent Alma's relationship with her overbearing mother in the film *Alma's Rainbow*

both illustrate ways in which Black women with some sort of power, in these examples that of the authority of motherhood, can suppress other women. Perhaps Ntozake Shange best summarizes the importance that Black women can have for one another in resisting oppressive conditions. Shange gives the following reason for why she writes: “When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves” (in Tate 1983, 162).

The Black Women’s Blues Tradition

African-American music as art has provided a second location where Black women have come to voice (Jackson 1981). “Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge,” suggests Angela Davis (1989, 200). Davis contends that the dominant group failed to grasp the social function of music in general and particularly the central role music played in all aspects of life in West African society. As a result, “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 form part of a “continuum of struggle which is at once aesthetic and political” (p. 201).

African-derived communication patterns maintain the integrity of the individual and his or her personal voice, but do so in the context of group activity (Smitherman 1977; Kochman 1981; Asante 1987; Cannon 1988). In music one effect of this oral mode of discourse is that individuality, rather than being stifled by group activity or being equated with specialization, actually flourishes in a group context (Sidran 1971).³ “There’s something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it,” claims Mahalia Jackson (1985, 454). “A song must do something for me as well as for the people that hear it. I can’t sing a song that doesn’t have a message. If it doesn’t have the strength it can’t lift you” (p. 446).

The blues tradition is an essential part of African-American music.⁴ Blues singer Alberta Hunter explains the importance of the blues as a way of dealing with pain: “To me, the blues are almost religious . . . almost sacred—when we sing the blues, we’re singing out of our own hearts . . . our feelings” (Harrison 1978, 63). Black people’s ability to cope with and even transcend trouble without ignoring it means that it will not destroy us (Cone 1972).

Traditionally, blues assumed a similar function in African-American oral culture to that played by print media for White, visually based culture. Blues was not just entertainment—it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of working-class Black life in America. Sherley Anne Williams contends that “the blues records of each decade explain something about the philosophical basis of our lives as black people. If we don’t understand that as so-

called intellectuals, then we don't really understand anything about ourselves" (in Tate 1983, 208). For African-American women, blues seemed to be everywhere. Mahalia Jackson describes its pervasiveness during her childhood in New Orleans: "The famous white singers like Caruso—you might hear them when you went by a white folk's house, but in a colored house you heard blues. You couldn't help but hear blues—all through the thin partitions of the houses—through the open windows—up and down the street in the colored neighborhoods—everybody played it real loud" (1985, 447).

Black women have been central in maintaining, transforming, and re-creating the blues traditions of African-American culture (Harrison 1978, 1988; Russell 1982; Davis 1998). Michele Russell asserts, "Blues, first and last, are a familiar idiom for Black women, even a staple of life" (1982, 130). Blues has occupied a special place in Black women's music as a site of the expression of Black women's self-definitions. The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place, and yet this atmosphere is intensely personal and individualistic. When Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African-American women.

Michele Russell's (1982) analysis of five Black women blues singers' music demonstrates how the texts of blues singers can be seen as expressions of a Black women's standpoint. Russell claims that the works of Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Esther Phillips help Black women "own their past, present, and future." To Russell, these women are primary because "the content of their message, combined with the form of their delivery, make them so" (p. 130).

The music of the classic blues singers of the 1920s—almost exclusively women—marks the early written record of this dimension of U.S. Black oral culture. The songs themselves were originally sung in small communities, where boundaries distinguishing singer from audience, call from response, and thought from action were fluid and permeable. Despite the control of White-run record companies, these records were made exclusively for the "race market" of African-Americans and thus targeted Black consumers. Because literacy was not possible for large numbers of Black women, these recordings represented the first permanent documents exploring a working-class Black women's standpoint that until then had been accessible to Black women in local settings. The songs can be seen as poetry, as expressions of ordinary Black women rearticulated through Black oral traditions.

The lyrics sung by many of the Black women blues singers challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification as the Other. The songs of Ma Rainey, dubbed "Queen of the Blues" and the first major female blues singer to be extensively recorded, validate Black feminist intellectual traditions expressed by working-class Black women. In contrast to the ingenues of most White popular music of the same period, Ma Rainey and her

contemporaries sing of mature, sexual women. For example, Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama" rejects the cult of true womanhood and its confining images of beauty:

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk
 Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk
 But the cow that's black and ugly has often got the sweetest milk.
 (Harrison 1978, 69)

Bessie Smith's "Get It, Bring It, and Put It Right Here"—like the words of Maria Stewart—advises Black women to possess the spirit of independence. She sings of her man:

I've had a man for fifteen years, give him his room and his board
 Once he was like a Cadillac, now he's like an old worn-out Ford.
 He never brought me a lousy dime, and put it in my hand
 Oh, there'll be some changes from now on, according to my plan.
 He's got to get it, bring it, and put it right here
 Or else he's gonna keep it out there.
 If he must steal it, beg it, or borrow it somewhere
 Long as he gets it, I don't care.
 (Russell 1982, 133)

Sometimes the texts of Black women blues singers take overtly political forms. Billie Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit" in 1939 at the end of a decade rife with racial unrest:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the
 root
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from
 the poplar trees.
 Pastoral scene of the gallant South, the bulging eyes and the twisted
 mouth,
 Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh, and the sudden smell of burning
 flesh!
 Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck, for the rain to gather, for the wind
 to suck, for the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.
 (*Billie Holiday Anthology* 1976, 111)

Through her powerful rendition of these lyrics, Billie Holiday demonstrated a direct connection to the antilynching political activism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and other better-known Black feminists. Holiday's music reaches from the past to express themes that shed light on the present.

Despite the contributions of Black women's blues as one location where ordinary Black women found voice, Ann duCille (1993) cautions against a trend in contemporary Black cultural criticism of viewing the blues through idealized lenses. DuCille contends that while Black blues queens like Bessie Smith and Ma

Rainey sang of sex and sexuality with a startling frankness for their times, they rarely could do so on their own terms. Despite the fact that at the peak of the classic blues era hundreds of women had the opportunity to record their work, they did so for White-male-controlled record companies. At the same time, middle-class Blacks who were engaged in a cultural Renaissance during the 1920s typically saw such music as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement. Black women's blues was often designated as "low" culture (Davis 1998, xii–xiii). Thus, while it appears that the Black women blues singers of the 1920s sang freely of sexually explicit themes, they did so in a complicated context of race, class, and gender politics.

Moreover, duCille points out that identifying the blues as the "authentic" location for Black women's voice splits Black experience into two seemingly opposed groups, middle-class Black women "literati" and working-class Black women blues singers. Deeming the blues singers to be more "authentic" relegates Black women writers, and those who study them, to the category of a less authentic Blackness. DuCille explores how the fiction of two middle-class Black women writers, Jessie Fauset and Nella Lawson, offered a more complex critique of society than that forwarded by the blues singers. DuCille's argument is not with the singers themselves, but primarily with how such seemingly safe spaces of Black women's blues are viewed within contemporary Black cultural criticism. However, keeping her caveats in mind, it is important to remember that despite their contemporary appropriations, for the vast majority of Black working-class women, Black women's blues spaces have long been important and remain so today (Davis 1998). Where else could working-class Black women say in public the things they had long shared among one another in private?

The Voices of Black Women Writers

During the summer of 1944, recent law school graduate Pauli Murray returned to her California apartment and found the following anonymous note from the "South Crocker Street Property Owner's Association" tacked to her door: "We . . . wish to inform you the flat you now occupy . . . is restricted to the white or Caucasian race only. . . . We intend to uphold these restrictions, therefore we ask that you vacate the above mentioned flat . . . within seven days" (1987, 253). Murray's response was to write. She remembers: "I was learning that creative expression is an integral part of the equipment needed in the service of a compelling cause; it is another form of activism. Words poured from my typewriter" (p. 255).

Though a Black women's written tradition existed (Christian 1985; Carby 1987), it was available primarily to educated women. Denied the literacy that enabled them to read books and novels, as well as the time to do so, working-class Black women struggled to find a public voice. Hence the significance of the blues and other dimensions of Black oral traditions in their lives. In this class-seg-

mented context, finding Black women's writing that transcends these divisions among written and oral traditions is noteworthy. In this regard, because it fits neither solely within the Black women's blues tradition nor within equally important traditions of Black women's writers, the work of Alice Childress (1956) remains exemplary. Childress created the character of Mildred, a fictional working-class, Black woman domestic worker. Through short monologues to her friend Marge, Mildred, a domestic worker, speaks out on a range of topics. Mildred's 62 monologues, each two or three pages in length, constitute provocative statements of Childress's Black feminist theory (Harris 1986). Take, for example, Mildred's rendition to Marge of what she said to her boss in response to hearing herself described to her boss's luncheon friends as a quasi-family member:

I am *not* just like one of the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen. Your mama borrows your lace tablecloth for her company and your son entertains his friends in your parlour, your daughter takes her afternoon nap on the living room couch and the puppy sleeps on your satin spread . . . so you can see I am not *just* like one of the family. (Childress 1956, 2).

In this passage, Childress creates a fictional version of what many Black women domestic workers have wanted to say at one time or another. She also advances a biting critique of how the mammy image has been used to justify Black women's bad treatment.

Foreshadowing Barbara Neely's creation of the character of Blanche, Mildred's ideas certainly ring true. But Childress's Mildred also illustrates a creative use of Black women's writing that is targeted not just to educated Black women, but to a wider Black women's community. The character of Mildred first appeared in a series of conversations that were originally published in Paul Robeson's newspaper, *Freedom*, under the title "Conversations from Life." They continued in the *Baltimore Afro-American* as "Here's Mildred." Since many of Childress's readers were themselves domestic workers, Mildred's bold assertions resonated with the silenced voices of many of these readers. Moreover, Mildred's identity as a Black working-class domestic and the form of publication of these fictionalized accounts illustrates an increasingly rare practice in Black intellectual production—a Black author writing to an African-American, working-class audience, using a medium controlled by Black people (Harris 1986).⁵

Since the 1970s, 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 literary criticism has documented the intellectual and personal space created for African-American women in this emerging body of ideas

(Washington 1980, 1982; Tate 1983; Evans 1984; Christian 1985; O'Neale 1986). Especially noteworthy are the ways in which many Black women writers build on former themes and approaches of the Black women's blues tradition (Williams 1979) and of earlier Black women writers (Cannon 1988).

How "Safe" Are Safe Spaces?

Historically, safe spaces were "safe" because they represented places where Black women could freely examine issues that concerned us. By definition, such spaces become less "safe" if shared with those who were not Black and female. Black women's safe spaces were never meant to be a way of life. Instead, they constitute one mechanism among many designed to foster Black women's empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects. As strategies, safe spaces rely on exclusionary practices, but their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society. As the work of Black women blues singers and Black women writers suggests, many of the ideas generated in such spaces found a welcome reception outside Black women's communities. But how could Black women generate these understandings of Black women's realities without first talking to one another?

Since the 1970s, U.S. Black women have been unevenly incorporated into schools, jobs, neighborhoods, and other U.S. social institutions that historically have excluded us. As a result, African-American women have become more class stratified than at any period in the past. In these newly desegregated settings, one new challenge consists of building "safe spaces" that do not become stigmatized as "separatist." U.S. Black women who find ourselves integrating corporations and colleges encounter new forms of racism and sexism that require equally innovative responses. A new rhetoric of color-blindness that reproduces social inequalities by treating people the same (Crenshaw 1997) makes it more difficult to maintain safe spaces at all. Any group that organizes around its own self-interests runs the risk of being labeled "separatist," "essentialist," and anti-democratic. This protracted attack on so-called identity politics works to suppress historically oppressed groups that aim to craft independent political agendas around identities of race, gender, class, and/or sexuality.

Within this climate, African-American women are increasingly asked why we want to "separate" ourselves from Black men and why feminism cannot speak for all women, including us. In essence, these queries challenge the need for distinctive Black women's communities as *political* entities. Black women's organizations devoted to cooking, nails, where to find a good baby-sitter, and other apolitical topics garner little attention. But how do Black women as a collectivity resist intersecting oppressions as they affect us without organizing as a group? How do U.S. Black women identify the specific issues associated with controlling images of Black womanhood without safe spaces where we can talk freely?

One reason that safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them, is that safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups. Such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women's independent self-definitions. When institutionalized, these self-definitions become foundational to politicized Black feminist standpoints. Thus, much more is at stake here than the simple expression of voice.

A broader climate that aims to suppress political speech among African-American women, among others, has affected the organization of historically safe spaces within Black civil society. Relationships among Black women, within families, and within Black community organizations all must contend with the new realities and rhetoric that characterize an unfulfilled racial and gender desegregation in the context of increasingly antagonistic class relationships.

The blues tradition in Black women's music also remains under assault under these new social conditions. Traditionally, Black women blues singers drew upon traditions of struggle in order to produce "progressive art." Such art was emancipatory because it fused thought, feeling, and action and helped Black women among others to see their world differently and act to change it. More recently, commodification of the blues and its transformation into marketable crossover music have virtually stripped it of its close ties to African-American oral traditions. Considerable controversy surrounds the issue of how to assess the diverse genres of contemporary Black music. As Angela Davis observes, "Some of the superstars of popular-musical culture today are unquestionably musical geniuses, but they have distorted the Black music tradition by brilliantly developing its form while ignoring its content of struggle and freedom" (1989, 208). Black literary critic Sondra O'Neale suggests that similar processes of depoliticization may be affecting Black women's writing. "Where are the Angela Davises, Ida B. Wellses, and Daisy Bateses of black feminist literature?" she asks (1986, 144).

Contemporary African-American musicians, writers, cultural critics, and intellectuals function in a dramatically different political economy than that of any prior generation. 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 relationships 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 meaning. These new meanings offered African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood. Far from being a secondary concern in bringing about social change, challenging controlling images and replacing them with a Black women's standpoint constituted an essential component in resisting intersecting oppressions (Thompson-Cager 1989). What have been some of the important ideas that developed in these safe spaces? Moreover, how useful are these ideas in responding to the greatly changed social context that confronts U.S. Black women?

The Importance of Self-Definition

"Black groups digging on white philosophies ought to consider the source. Know who's playing the music before you dance," cautions poet Nikki Giovanni (1971, 126). Her advice is especially germane for African-American women. Giovanni suggests: "We Black women are the single group in the West intact. And anybody can see we're pretty shaky. We are . . . the only group that derives its identity from itself. I think it's been rather unconscious but we measure ourselves by ourselves, and I think that's a practice we can ill afford to lose" (1971, 144). When Black women's very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions 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. Author Alexis DeVeaux notes that there is a "great exploration of the self in women's work. It's the self in relationship with an intimate other, with the community, the nation and the world" (in Tate 1983, 54). Far from being a narcissistic or trivial concern, this placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships. DeVeaux continues, "you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups" (p. 54).

Black women have also stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind in their blues. Sherley Anne Williams's analysis of the affirmation of self in the blues make a critical contribution in understanding the blues as a Black women's text. In discussing the blues roots of Black literature, Williams notes, "The assertion of individuality and the implied assertion—as action, not mere verbal statement—of self is an important dimension of the blues" (1979, 130).

The assertion of self usually comes at the end of a song, after the description or analysis of the troublesome situation. This affirmation of self is often the only solution to that problem or situation. Nina Simone's (1985) classic blues song "Four Women" illustrates this use of the blues to affirm self. Simone sings of

three Black women whose experiences typify controlling images: Aunt Sarah, the mule, whose back is bent from a lifetime of hard work; Sweet Thing, the Black prostitute who will belong to anyone who has money to buy; and Saphronia, the mulatto whose Black mother was raped late one night. Simone explores Black women's objectification as the Other by invoking the pain these three women actually feel. But Peaches, the fourth woman, is an especially powerful figure, because Peaches is angry. "I'm awfully bitter these days," Peaches cries out, "because my parents were slaves." These words and the feelings they invoke demonstrate her growing awareness and self-definition of the situation she encountered. They offer to the listener not sadness and remorse, but an anger that leads to action. This is the type of individuality Williams means—not that of talk but self-definitions that foster action.

While the theme of the journey also appears in the work of Black men, African-American women writers and musicians explore this journey toward freedom in ways that are characteristically female (Thompson-Cager 1989). Black women's journeys, though at times embracing political and social issues, basically take personal and psychological forms and rarely reflect the freedom of movement of Black men who hop "trains," "hit the road," or in other ways physically travel in order to find that elusive sphere of freedom from racial oppression. Instead, Black women's journeys often involve "the transformation of silence into language and action" (Lorde 1984, 40). Typically tied to children and/or community, fictional Black women characters, especially those created prior to the 1990s, search for self-definition within close geographical boundaries. Even though physical limitations confine the Black heroine's quest to a specific area, "forming complex personal 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 a free mind, Black heroines may remain "motionless on the outside . . . but inside?"

Given the physical limitations on Black women'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 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, African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves. Sonia Sanchez points to this version of self by stating, "We must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there's a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people" (Tate 1983, 134). Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions.⁶

This journey toward self-definition has political significance. As Mary Helen Washington observes, Black women who struggle to "forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them . . . are aware and conscious, and that very consciousness is potent" (1980, xv). Identity is not the goal but rather

the point of departure in the process of self-definition. In this 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. Peaches's statement, "I'm awfully bitter these days because my parents were slaves," illustrates this transformation.

This particular expression of the journey toward self-definition offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined, controlling images of African-American women. Replacing negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized. John Gwaltney's (1980) interview with Nancy White, a 73-year-old Black woman, suggests that ordinary Black women can be acutely aware of the power of these controlling images. To Nancy White the difference between the controlling images applied to African-American and White women is one of degree, not of kind:

My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (p. 148)

Although both groups are objectified, albeit in different ways, the images function to dehumanize and control both groups. Seen in this light, it makes little sense in the long run for Black women to exchange one set of controlling images for another even if positive stereotypes bring better treatment in the short run.

The insistence on Black women's self-definitions reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image—namely, refuting the Black matriarchy thesis—to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects.

Self-Valuation and Respect

Self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood. In contrast, the theme of Black women's self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions. Many of the controlling images applied to African-American women are actually dis-

torted renderings of those aspects of our behavior that threaten existing power arrangements (Gilkes 1983a; D. White 1985). For example, strong mothers are threatening because they contradict prevailing definitions of femininity. To ridicule strong, assertive Black mothers by labeling them matriarchs reflects an effort to control a dimension of Black women's behavior that threatens the status quo. African-American women who value those aspects of Black womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in scholarship and the popular media challenge some of the basic ideas inherent in an ideology of domination.

The emphasis that Black feminist thinkers have placed on respect illustrates the significance of self-valuation. In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, we have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others. Black women's 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. Black feminist critic Claudia Tate (1983) reports that the issue of self-esteem is so primary in the writing of Black women that it deserves special attention. Tate claims that what the writers seem to be saying is, "Women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves" (p. xxiii). Her analysis is certainly borne out in Alice Walker's comments to an audience of women. Walker cautioned, "Please remember, especially in these times of group-think and the right-on chorus, that no person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world" (Walker 1983, 36). The right to be Black *and* female *and* respected pervades everyday conversations among African-American women. In describing the importance self-respect has for her, elderly domestic worker Sara Brooks notes, "I may not have as much as you, I may not have the education you got, but still, if I conduct myself as a decent person, I'm just as good as anybody" (Simonsen 1986, 132).

Respect from others—especially from Black men—has been a recurring theme in Black women's writing. In describing the things a woman wants out of life, middle-class Marita Bonner lists "a career as fixed and as calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys. Time. . . . And of course, a husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself" (Bonner 1987, 3). Black women's belief in respect also emerges in the works of a variety of Black women blues singers. One of the best-known popular statements of Black women's demand for self-respect and the respect of others is found in Aretha Franklin's (1967) rendition of the Otis Redding song "Respect." Aretha sings to her man:

What you want? Baby I got it.
 What you need? You know I got it.
 All I'm asking for is a little respect when you come home.

Even though the lyrics can be sung by anyone, they take on special meaning

when sung by Aretha in the way that she sings them. On one level the song functions as a metaphor for the condition of African-Americans in a racist society. But Aretha's being a Black *woman* enables the song to tap a deeper meaning. Within the blues tradition, the listening audience of African-American women assumes "we" Black women, even though Aretha as the blues singer sings "I." Sherley Anne Williams describes the power of Aretha's blues: "Aretha was right on time, but there was also something about the way Aretha characterized respect as something given with force and great effort and cost. And when she even went so far as to spell the word 'respect,' we just knew that this sister wasn't playing around about getting Respect and keeping it" (Williams 1979, 124).

June Jordan suggests that this emphasis on respect is tied to a distinctive Black feminist politic. For Jordan, a "morally defensible Black feminism" is verified in the ways U.S. Black women present ourselves to others, and in the ways Black women treat people different from ourselves. While self-respect is essential, respect for others is key. "As a Black feminist," claims Jordan, "I cannot be expected to respect what somebody else calls self-love if that concept of self-love requires my suicide to any degree" (1981, 144).

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:

We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing. . . . Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted: Sue for your rights and privileges. . . . You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not. (Richardson 1987, 38)

Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have "possessed the spirit of independence," have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity (Steady 1987). These beliefs have found wide support among African-American women. For example, when asked what they admired about their mothers, the women in Gloria Joseph's (1981) study of Black mother/daughter relationships recounted their mothers' independence and ability to provide in the face of difficulties. Participants in Lena Wright Myers's (1980) study of Black women's coping skills respected women who were resourceful and self-reliant. Black women's autobiographies, such as Shirley Chisholm's *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), typify Black women's self-valuation of self-reliance. As elderly domestic worker Nancy White cogently explains, "Most black women can be their own

boss, so that's what they be" (Gwaltney 1980, 149).

The works of prominent Black women blues singers also counsel the importance of self-reliance and independence for African-American women. In her classic ballad "God Bless the Child That Got His Own," Billie Holiday sings:

The strong gets more, while the weak ones fade,
 Empty pockets don't ever make the grade;
 Mama may have, Papa may have,
 But God bless the child that got his own!
 (*Billie Holiday Anthology* 1976, 12)

In this mournful song Billie Holiday offers an insightful analysis of the need for autonomy and self-reliance. "Money, you got lots of friends, crowdin' 'round the door," she proclaims. But "when you're gone and spendin' ends they don't come no more." In these passages Holiday admonishes Black women to become financially independent because having one's "own" allows women to choose their relationships.

The linking of economic self-sufficiency as one critical dimension of self-reliance with the demand for respect permeates Black feminist thought. For example, in "Respect" when Aretha sings, "Your kisses sweeter than honey, but guess what, so is my money," she demands respect on the basis of her economic self-reliance. Perhaps this connection between respect, self-reliance, and assertiveness is best summarized by Nancy White, who declares, "There is a very few black women that their husbands can pocketbook to death because we can do for ourselves and will do so in a minute!" (Gwaltney 1980, 149).

Self, Change, and Personal Empowerment

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us 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 Audre Lorde explores 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 ourselves. 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 lives.

Nikki Giovanni illuminates these connections among self, change, and personal empowerment. She admonishes that people are rarely powerless, no matter how stringent the restrictions on our lives: "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something" (in Tate 1983, 68). Giovanni recognizes that effective change occurs through action. The multiple strategies of resistance that Black women have employed, such as withdrawing

from postemancipation agricultural work in order to return their labor to their families, ostensibly conforming to the deference rituals of domestic work, protesting male bias in African-American organizations, or creating the progressive art of Black women's blues all represent actions designed to bring about change. Here is the connected self and the individual empowerment that comes from change in the context of community.

But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also personally empowering. Any individual Black woman who is forced to remain "motionless on the outside," can develop the "inside" of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential. In Black women's literature

this type of change . . . occurs because the heroine recognizes, and more importantly respects her inability to alter a situation. . . . This is not to imply that she is completely circumscribed by her limitations. On the contrary, she learns to exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie. In this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions. (Tate 1983, xxiv)

In this passage Claudia Tate demonstrates the significance of rearticulation, namely, redefining social realities by combining familiar ideas in new ways (Omi and Winant 1994, 163). But rearticulation does not mean reconciling womanist ethics with typically opposed Eurocentric masculinist ones. Instead, as Chezia Thompson-Cager contends, rearticulation "confronts them in the tradition of 'naming as power' by revealing them very carefully" (1989, 590). Naming daily life by applying language to everyday experience infuses it with the new meaning of a womanist consciousness. Naming becomes a way of transcending the limitations of intersecting oppressions.

Black women's literature contains many examples of how individual Black women become personally empowered by a changed consciousness. Barbara Christian maintains that the heroines of 1940s Black women's literature, such as Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Cleo Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948), are defeated not only by social reality but by their "lack of self-knowledge." In contrast, the heroines from the 1950s to the present represent a significant shift toward self-knowledge as a sphere of freedom. Christian dates the shift from Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) and claims, "Because Maud Martha constructs her own standards, she manages to transform that 'little life' into so much more despite the limits set on her. . . . [She] emerges neither crushed nor triumphant" (1985, 176).

According to many African-American women writers, no matter how

oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself. An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice. Like Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, some women write themselves free. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused, Celie writes letters to God when no one else will listen. The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others. Other women talk themselves free. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie tells her story to a good friend, a prime example of the rearticulation process essential for Black feminist thought (Hurston 1937). Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* (1975) also captures this journey toward self-definition, self-valuation, and an empowered self. At the end of the play the women gather around one woman who speaks of the pain she experienced at seeing her children killed. They listen until she says, "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely." These words, expressing her ability to define herself as worthwhile, draw them together. They touch one another as part of a Black women's community that heals the member in pain, but only after she has taken the first step of wanting to be healed, of wanting to make the journey toward finding the voice of empowerment.

Does Black Women's Consciousness Still Matter?

Despite the persistence of these four ideas about consciousness—the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment—these themes do not find a prominent place in much U.S. Black feminist thought within academia. Sadly, Black women intellectuals in the academy find themselves pressured to write for academic audiences, most of which remain resistant to including U.S. Black women as students, faculty, and administrators. However interested highly educated, middle-class, White male and female academic audiences may be in Black women's intellectual production, their concerns differ markedly from those of the majority of U.S. Black women.

Despite this context, many Black women intellectuals within academia still explore this theme of consciousness, but do so in new and often highly important ways. Take, for example, criminologist Beth Richie's (1996) book *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*. Through interviews with women who were being detained in jail, Richie advances the innovative thesis that those Black women who had been self-reliant and independent as children and thus imagined themselves as strong Black women were *more* likely to be battered than those who did not. Upon first glance, this is a curious com-

bination—the more self-reliant simultaneously value themselves less. Richie’s explanation is revealing. The strong Black women saw themselves as personal failures if they sought help. In contrast, those women who did not carry the burden of this seemingly positive image of Black womanhood found it easier to ask for help. Richie’s study points to the significance of external definitions of all types. By attending to heterogeneity among Black women, her work creates space for new self-valuations to appear that need not be attached to images of strong Black women.

The increased scholarly attention to Black adolescent girls should reveal new reactions to intersecting oppressions among a population that has come of age under new social conditions. Within this tradition, *Sugar in the Raw* (1997), Rebecca Carroll’s 15 published interviews from more than 50 that she conducted among U.S. Black girls provides a glimpse into the consciousness of contemporary Black girls. Despite elements of Black popular culture that bombard them with images of sexualized women and the plethora of “hoochies” populating music videos, many of the girls display an impressive maturity. Take, for example, 18-year-old Kristen’s reflections on her struggles for self-valuation brought on by her crush on a Black boy who seemed unaware that she existed:

It was obvious and evident that most if not all of the black boys in my school wanted nothing to do with black girls, which was sort of traumatizing. You can’t really come away from an experience like that without feeling like there is something wrong with you. In the final analysis, I ended up feeling that there was something wrong with him, but it was hell getting there. (Carroll 1997, 131–32)

The increased attention in Black feminist-influenced scholarship paid to Black women’s pain in abusive relationships of all sorts, and to the special concerns of Black adolescent girls both seem designed to create new intellectual and political space for the “hellish” journeys that many Black women still encounter. At least at this historic moment, the need to put up a united front seems less important than exploring the various ways that individual Black women are personally empowered and disempowered, even within allegedly safe spaces. Consciousness still matters, but it becomes one that acknowledges the complexities of crosscutting relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Weaving throughout these historic and contemporary efforts at self-definition is the quest to move from silence to language to individual and group action. In this quest, persistence is a fundamental requirement for this journey. Black women’s persistence is fostered by the strong belief that to be Black and female is valuable and worthy of respect. In the song “A Change Is Gonna Come,” Aretha Franklin (1967) expresses this feeling of enduring despite the odds. She sings that there were times that she thought that she would not last for long. She sings of how it has been an “uphill journey all the way” to find the strength to carry on. But despite the difficulties, Aretha “knows” that “a change is gonna come.”

Whether individual struggles to develop a changed consciousness or the group persistence needed to transform social institutions, actions that bring about changes empower African-American women. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition, as individuals, we are changed. When linked to group action, our individual struggles gain new meaning. Because our actions as individuals change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. Perhaps that is why so many African-American women have managed to persist and “make a way out of no way.” Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.