An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Black Feminism

by Cellestine Ware

The following article is a revision of a chapter from Cellestine Ware's first book, Woman Power: Transitions in American Feminism (Tower Publications, 1970). She was a founder of New York Radical Feminists, is active in the New York movement, and is currently at work on her second book.

The rejection of black women by black men is a phenomenon best explained by the black man's hatred of blackness and by the need to dominate that underlies male-female relationships. As such, this rejection is an excellent study for feminists. The strength of the resistance to women's independence is shown by the strong epithets directed against black women. The black male's reaction is the forerunner of what all feminists will face as they grow in strength. As women begin to assume positions of equality with men, they will meet virulent abuse, much like that endured by black women now. They will also discover that men will reject them for more "feminine" women.

Black sociologist Calvin Hernton's Sex and Racism in America is filled with examples of the defamation and rejection, now subtle, now blatant, that are the lot of black women. For example:

It is no mystery why white society is now tending to accept the black woman more readily than the black male. First of all, the Negro woman, like the white woman, does not represent to the white world as much of an aggressor against the present power structure as does the Negro man.

It wasn't true any time in the Sixties that black women were hired

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before black men. On the contrary, black women got little benefit from the drive to find black talent.

The rare black woman who had achieved a position of prominence was bitterly resented by black males. Black personnel men have been known to lose the resumés of promising black women. One such administrator at a famous radio and television station told a black woman applicant: “We already have enough sisters in the communications industry. It’s time the brothers got ahead.”

In the executive talent shortage of the 1960’s, some organizations encouraged women in the patronizing way they had encouraged promotable Negroes when the Negro rights movement was popular; but the efforts to see that qualified women were promoted were much more half-hearted than those promoting Negroes. In 1967, for instance, 15 percent of a group of companies queried by the Bureau of National Affairs said they had undertaken aggressive recruiting of promotable Negroes in response to Title VII, but only one company reported an aggressive policy of recruiting women. In the business world sex is more of a barrier than race.

Yet history has made black women more independent than most American women. Unable to depend on the black man for the economic necessities or for protection, they did not acquire the habit of subordination to masculine authority. Because of this failure to develop subserviency to the male, black women are belittled by both middle- and lower-class black men. The middle-class black man, such as Mr. Hernton, sees the black woman as domineering and castrating. To wit:

Repeatedly I have witnessed Negro women virtually dominating their white husbands. There may be fights, but she capitalizes on her Negroness and on her sex image by wielding a sort of Amazon mastery [my italics] over the white male. In all but a few black woman-white man relationships, it is the man who must do the adjusting—and what he must adjust to is nothing less than what is referred to as the Negro’s mode of existence or the Negro’s conceptualization of life in the United States.

Mr. Hernton is displaying common anxieties and fears in his emotionally charged statement about the “Amazon mastery” that he says black women develop over their white husbands. His translation of circumstantial necessity into a deliberate attempt at oppression ignores social realities: Discrimination and intolerance invari-
ably force interracial couples to live in black communities, or at least in well-integrated ones.

The lower-class black male sees black women as bitches. The welfare check has made the poor black woman economically independent of the men who come and go in her life, and on whom she cannot rely. Poor black males complain of being told to “Get out! And don’t bring your ass back here until you’ve got a job!” There is antagonism between black males and females, especially in the poorest segments of the community. The women are contemptuous of the men for not being able to find work and provide for their families, or for throwing their money away on gambling, other women, and drinking. The men curse the women for not being feminine and comforting.

The mistake that sociologists are making and that black men seem to be making is the assumption that these women have chosen to be heads of their families. They have become heads of households by default—as the only responsible adults in their families. It is interesting to note that the state menaces and subordinates these women in much the same way that the salary-earning male head of the house does his wife. Protection has its price.

It is the pressures of poverty and slum life that grind down the black family and destroy the role of the male as father-protector. It is these pressures, not black women, that make the confidence man the ghetto hero. In Harlem, in Watts, in Hough, the admired man beats the game: dresses sharp, has a string of girl friends, and doesn’t have a steady job. He gets by doing a little of this and a little of that. For the poor black man, there is no ego aggrandizement in the traditional role of the head of the house. Economic and social racism force him to be inadequate in such a role. And so the black bitch was created to justify the confidence man.

According to Fletcher Knebel, Abbey Lincoln first verbalized the current black female unrest (it is as yet unorganized) in the face of this projection of the mythical black bitch. “We are the women,” she declared, “whose nose is ‘too big,’ whose mouth is ‘too big and loud,’ whose behind is ‘too big and broad,’ whose feet are ‘too big and flat,’ whose face is ‘too black and shiny,’ who’s just too damned much for everybody.” She was referring to Sapphire, the Amazon of the black male imagination.

The distortions that underlie the transformation of the black
mother into a witch-like figure with magical powers to destroy are obviously found in the educated as well as the ignorant. Recently a black educator said: “For the black man, the black woman is too much like his mother. He sees her as domineering, bossy, a woman who runs things. He wants a desirable, easy sex companion, and he finds her in the white woman.” What will happen when this desirable white doll becomes real? Perhaps she will be rejected for an easygoing Oriental?

A black college student asserts: “We kind of fear [my italics] the middle-class black girl we meet around school. She’s snobbish, uppity, and inclined to sneer at a black man unless he excels at something. White girls, for a lot of reasons, are easier, less Victorian, and let’s face it, they have their own money.”

It is the fear and anxiety of the black male that lead to the construction of the “evil” black female. By now, the superstructure of the “black bitch” bears as little relation to the real black woman as any myth to the reality. The preceding quotes suggest that the men speaking have no honest contact with women of either race. The magical approach of the male to the female is an ancient orientation toward women as the aliens of the human world.

The complaint that black women challenge black men is further proof of the threatening nature of female independence to most men. Philip Roth’s indictment of the omnipotent Jewish mother with her all-devouring love has become a familiar theme of our literature just as Jews have been assimilated into the power centers of American life. Although the parallels in the black and Jewish traditions are slight, both cultures are now remarkable for the vehemence of the attacks on their women. I suggest that black literature will increasingly consist of virulent attacks on the evil black mother as black men move into positions of power.