Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Sexual Politics* and the Genealogy of the Strong Black Woman

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Increasingly, as *Black Sexual Politics* nears its ending, a shift in tone and level of intensity makes a reader aware that Collins’s analysis of interlocking social institutions and media representations is aimed not just at informing, but at liberating, individual African American readers—that she wishes to give African American men and women the tools to resist the internalization of racist sexual ideology and denigrating gender roles. The texts that I examine here—by young Black feminist writers Veronica Chambers, Joan Morgan, and Kimberley Springer, along with a response to their work from Sheila Radford-Hill—continue Collins’s deconstructive work on Black gender stereotypes by focusing on the Strong Black Woman role. These autobiographical/theoretical texts not only provide a historical context for the role’s origins and development, but also add a psychological and emotional dimension: they tell us what it means to individual African American women to live up to the gender role requirements of Strong Black Woman. Juxtaposed through my analysis, these texts provide a kind of dialogue that moves, in the spirit of Collins’ earlier pioneering work on standpoint theory, toward a collective standpoint on the Strong Black Woman gender role and its psychic and emotional costs.

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Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) lays the groundwork for a progressive Black sexual politics by exploring virtually all the ideological branches of the “new racism” that in the post-civil rights era maintains racial disparity by keeping racial boundaries in place—from social institutions like the “prison industrial complex” that physically separates 25% of young Black men from normal American society (p. 80) to a range of media representations of Black people that in subtle and not-so-subtle ways serves to keep Black people in their place. I want to catch up Collins’s argument at one corner of this vast web—namely, the processes of gender interpellation, or the internalization of gender roles. When in the last four chapters Collins addresses her African American readers with a plea to resist the internalization of damaging Black gender roles devised to keep structures of racial inequality in place, her tone becomes more urgent, her prose more impassioned, and we realize that a driving force of her cultural analysis has been the need to give her African American readers the critical tools necessary to unpack the derogatory messages hidden in Black gender roles and enable them to resist pressures to internalize them. I contribute this response essay as an extension of Collins’s discussion of internalization and in particular of the personal and political effects of internalizing the Strong Black Woman gender identity.

Gendering processes combine the psychological with the political: on the one hand, internalization is a psychological process through which one accepts the cultural representation of woman or man as one’s self-representation (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 2); on the other hand, the internalization of a gender role serves the larger political function of maintaining unequal power relations. I trace both the psychological and the political implications of internalizing the Strong Black Woman gender identity by consulting the accounts of contemporary Black women who have lived out the role—autobiographical/theoretical works by Veronica Chambers, Joan Morgan, Kimberly Springer, and Sheila Radford-Hill. These women describe from within the emotional and physical burdens of living up to the Strong Black Woman ideal. Following Collins’s model of tracing a raced stereotype through its historical permutations in order to reveal the ideology that drives it, I use their texts and Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) to sketch out
a genealogy of the Strong Black Woman stereotype, as over time the figure becomes the fulcrum for changing race, gender, class, and generational power relations.

Throughout *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins is true to the principles of intersectionality that her 1990 *Black Feminist Theory* pioneered. In *Black Sexual Politics*, there is never an issue that Collins treats as a gender-only or race-only or sexual orientation-only problem: she turns the lenses of race, gender, class, and sexuality analysis on every social problem and social practice that she discusses. When Collins turns to gender stereotypes, intersectionality continues to serve as her theoretical framework: the paired stereotypes “weak Black man and strong Black woman,” which she claims are central to dominant Black gender ideology, may appear to be about gender only, but in fact they support racial categories. The racist logic goes like this: the too-strong Black woman and the correspondingly too-weak Black man who is her partner demonstrate the failure of Blacks to achieve and enact the “normal” (that is, White) gender roles of masterful man and submissive woman; this dysfunctionality proves Black men and women’s racial inferiority; the deteriorating material conditions of Black people’s lives are a result not of racial discrimination but of Black people’s own flawed values and morals. Thus raced gender ideology functions to place the blame for structural racial inequality on Black people themselves.

Gender stereotypes exert power by appearing to be “normal and natural” truths about men and women that explain current gender arrangements; what sustains them as “normal” is their decontextualization—their separation from the historical matrix in which they were fabricated and from the ideological matrix in which they function. Collins denaturalizes the stereotypes of Black gender by contextualizing them both historically and ideologically. First, she provides the historical context that produced the stereotypes of strong Black woman and weak Black man—as well as other figures of Black masculinity and femininity—and describes the ideological purposes behind their production. Second, she shows how the stereotypes of strong Black woman and weak Black man interlock with other stereotypes to sustain an overarching ideology. Although a stereotype appears to stand alone, embodying a taken-for-granted truth about a group, in reality each stereotype depends for its efficacy on a network of other stereotypes. The network of figurations as a whole supplies a hegemonic explanation of social relations—while at the
same time masking the actuality of power relations (Carby, 1987, pp. 20-22). To show the links between stereotypes is to demonstrate how they operate ideologically and thus to denaturalize them.

For example, as Collins points out, the “weak Black man” and “strong Black woman” constitute a binary in which each term is dependent on the other to define it. In turn, the pair “weak man/strong woman” functions in a binary opposition with the pair dominant man/submissive woman. The submissive woman and dominant man are White, and right: the message is, you have to be White to be a “real” man or a “real” woman. And the weak man/strong woman stereotypes are linked to class stereotypes, such as the “authentic” Black working-class male versus the “sell-out” middle-class Black man: both are “weak” according to the dominant ideology but in very different, and differently valuated, ways. Because Collins analyzes gender, sexuality, and class stereotypes so exhaustively, she enables readers to see how they link up to form a system of figures that, taken together, inculcate notions of Black inferiority.

Although Collins carries forward from her 1990 *Black Feminist Thought* her interest in analyzing the ways that stereotypes of Black women and men “are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression” (p. 68), it seems to me that her most intense focus in *Black Sexual Politics* is on the damage that internalizing these denigrating stereotypes can do to individuals’ self-esteem and, particularly, to intimate relations between Black women and men. When African American women and men internalize the gender ideology of “weak men, strong women,” there are political effects: The anger that could energize protests against the unjust allocation of resources in a racist society is diverted into conflict between African American men and women, dividing them from each other and thus preventing the solidarity needed for collective resistance (2005, p. 180). Collins’s most urgent appeal is a plea to African Americans to recognize the racist content of cultural representations of Black men and women, resist internalizing them, and thus free themselves to “see one another in honest and loving ways, reversing the process of dehumanization associated with oppression” (2005, p. 306).

I want to supplement Collins’s analysis of the political and personal effects of internalizing the Strong Black Woman gender identity by consulting a series of personal/theoretical writings by African American women writers: two autobiographical books, *Mama’s Girl* by Ve-
ronica Chambers (1996) and When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost by Joan Morgan (1999), an essay by Kimberly Springer entitled “Third Wave Black Feminism?” (2002), and a responding essay by Sheila Radford-Hill, “Keepin’ It Real: A Generational Commentary on Kimberly Springer’s ‘Third Wave Black Feminism?’” (2002). The Springer essay, which discusses the work of Chambers and Morgan, appears together with Sheila Radford-Hill’s commentary on it in the Spring 2002 issue of Signs. In my discussion of these texts, I extend Collins’s analysis of the Strong Black Woman role in both psychological and political directions. First, I think about what the two generations of Black women, the “daughters” Chambers and Morgan and the “mother,” Radford-Hill, tell us about the psychological mechanisms of gendering. Then, in the spirit of Collins’s examination of stereotypes’ continuity through changing historical circumstances, I use these women’s texts, together with Collins’s, to construct a history of the stereotype’s shifting political uses over time. The questions here are feminist ones: Who benefits? Whose interests have been served in the past and are served in the present by women who accept the Strong Black Woman role? How does the role function in raced and gendered power relations, historically and today?

An analysis of interpellation processes¹ that impose the Strong Black Woman gender role has to begin with an acknowledgment that being a strong black woman is in the first instance a necessary

¹“Interpellation” is the term that Althusser (1971) uses to describe the process whereby the social system calls an individual into his or her subject position. He uses an allegory to illustrate the process. An individual is walking along the street; a policeman calls, “Hey, you there!”; the individual turns and thereby acknowledges that he is the one who is hailed (I am he). The turn represents his entry into the social position designated by the policeman (the social Law) (pp. 174–175). The anecdote illustrates Althusser’s proposition that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (p. 173). One is not a subject until one is hailed into one’s social position; one becomes a subject through subjection to the social Law, and there is no subjectivity previous to or apart from one’s social position. Judith Butler (1997) has questioned Althusser’s proposition that there is no subject before the hailing, pointing out that the turn toward the call, the acceptance of the Law’s designation, presupposes a subject who chooses to turn—a subject who chooses to accept the hailing into a particular identity position (pp. 106–131). Her problematizing of interpellation opens the way for what is, to me, the more interesting (feminist) question: what ideological forces make us desire to embrace the designated subject position, when that position is a subordinate one? See de Lauretis (1987) and Wyatt (2004).
response to living conditions within a racist economy. As Victor Wolfenstein (1998) remarks, “One of the built-in features of white racist oppression is that it forces black women to bear unusual hardship, to survive and care for others in the most difficult of circumstances” (p. 50): to survive, they have to be strong. Since emancipation, the lack of steady jobs for Black men has sent Black women into the work force; their income has not been supplemental but “essential to family survival” (Collins, 2005, p. 199). Because Black women have customarily supported the family financially, as well as acting as the primary caretakers of children, they have acceded to a position of authority within the family. To succeed in bearing the double burden of principal breadwinner and principal nurturer within a world structured by racial discrimination, a woman has to have extraordinary strength, endurance, and resilience.

In their autobiographical/critical works, Joan Morgan and Veronica Chambers recognize and admire the strength of the actual Black women whose history of “struggle and survival” is every “black woman’s spiritual legacy” (Morgan, 1999, p. 87); yet they also perceive the Strong Black Woman as a gender role thrust upon them by their families and communities as a socially constructed identity that requires the denial of their spontaneous feelings and needs. Joan Morgan attributes her existence in the “STRONGBLACKWOMAN” role to

the years of social conditioning that told me it was my destiny to live my life as BLACKSUPERWOMAN Emeritus. That by the sole virtues of my race and gender I was supposed to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for every soul who needed me, and, yes, ... require less from my lovers than they did from me because after all, I was a STRONGBLACKWOMAN and they were just ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN [p. 87].

Being a Strong Black Woman meant that she could not admit “vulnerability or imperfection” or neediness. If ever she slipped and began to tell friends or family how bad she actually felt, “it seemed like I could barely get the words out before somebody reminded me I was a STRONGBLACKWOMAN” (p. 90). Morgan concisely defines the gender role: A Strong Black Woman does not show weakness or neediness but remains always stoic and competent,
the “dependable rock for every soul that needed me.” And she
names the process whereby she became a STRONGBLACK-
WOMAN as internalization: “I’d internalized the SBW credo: No
matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dig-
nity” (p. 90).

Veronica Chambers not only explicitly says that her mother raised
her with the message that “black women were strong and that black
women do not get depressed”—“depression” was “demarcated as
white girls’ domain” (1996, p. 72); her autobiography also demon-
strates on nearly every page that she was motivated to embrace and
maintain the Strong Black Woman role by her desire to meet her
mother’s expectations and earn her love. Morgan’s and Chambers’s
accounts reflect gendering processes familiar to feminist psychoana-
lytic theorists: as Chambers’s desire for her mother’s approval testi-
fies, a child is docile to the family imposition of gender roles not be-
cause she or he is a blank slate passively accepting the imprint of the
parents; rather, she or he actively strives to win the parent’s love by
And Morgan’s fear of showing need or fear or sadness to friends and
family indicates the way that community gender expectations, to-
gether with the threat of community ostracism, keep a woman from
breaking out of the Strong Black Woman role, even for a moment.

But there is a dimension of raced gender identity formation that
(White) feminist psychoanalytic accounts of gendering have over-
looked: if a gender role which is now imposed by Black communities
and families originated as a White-created stereotype designed to
promote White dominance, what is the effect of that history on the
woman who internalizes it?

In the forum provided by Signs, the established Black feminist
theorist Sheila Radford-Hill (2002) responds to Springer’s article
and to the voices of Chambers and Morgan quoted in it. If Cham-
bers and Morgan describe the position of the “daughters” on
whom the Strong Black Woman role is imposed, Radford-Hill ex-
plains the motivation of the Black mothers who pass on the role to
their daughters:

As black mothers in the 1970s, we were keenly aware of what
[degradation, discrimination, and disrespect] we had faced as
young adults. Although we hoped that our daughters would be
spared the effects of racism and sexism, we feared otherwise, so we raised our daughters with the capacity to build a self-concept that could withstand male rejection, economic deprivation, crushing family responsibilities, and countless forms of discrimination. In our view, the most effective antidote to having our daughters’ lives destroyed by their experiences with racism and sexism was to build and maintain an intact self. To develop such a self-concept required us to pass along a variation of Strong Black Woman absent, we thought, the false promises and unrealistic expectations the image evoked in us [pp. 1085-1086].

Thus the *Signs* forum provides an opening for understanding the processes of gender-role internalization—both from the standpoint of the mothers who inculcate the role and from the perspective of the daughters who internalize it. To Radford-Hill, and, she implies, the maternal generation for which she speaks, instilling the Strong Black Woman identity is an adaptive response to the nexus of power relations in which Black daughters are located—a form of maternal protection for daughters’ self-esteem against the ravages of sexism and racism.

As Radford-Hill’s commentary reveals, the transmission of gender is not merely a psychological process; it is always political, a response to particular power relations and to particular class and race pressures—here, “male rejection, economic deprivation, crushing family responsibilities, and countless forms of discrimination.” Morgan and Radford-Hill review the long political history that inflects the gender role today.

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2Lynne Layton (1998) makes the important point that internalization is a complex interactive process between individual and culture: a girl does not absorb and reproduce a gender role wholesale; rather, the role is inflected by the individual’s subjectivity. “The cultural meanings of ‘black middle-class female’ will not exhaust but will be part of the way a girl makes meaning of her gender identity. ...But the way a black middle-class girl construes a gender identity at any particular historical moment, the way she puts together the possibilities that circulate in her family and culture” result in an individually inflected version of the gender role—which “in turn contributes to constructing the set of cultural practices that will define “black middle-class female” (pp. 10–11).
Morgan (1999) locates the origins of the stereotype in slavery. The idea that Black female slaves were strong enough to endure any pain and keep on going justified slaveowners’ abuses, including rape: “The black woman’s mythic ‘strength’ became a convenient justification for every atrocity committed on her” (p. 98). The Strong Black Woman was initially a White construct that benefited White slaveowners.

Later, in the 1960s, the Strong Black slave woman morphs into the Black matriarch. The Moynihan report on the Black family lays the blame for the “pathology” of the Black family on the too-strong Black mother. “As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands”—who then, “understandably, either desert their partners or refuse to marry the mothers of their children” (Collins, 1990, p. 74). Because African American women fail to fulfill traditional womanly duties and “fail to model appropriate gender behavior,” their children do not grow up with the values necessary to succeed in American society. The focus on the Black family’s deviancy diverted “attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children,” enabling White America to lay the blame for Black poverty on Black mothers (Collins, 1990, p. 74). So here again the stereotype serves the interests of the dominant White majority.

But the Strong Black Woman image becomes the focus of a power struggle not across race but between Black men and Black women in the 1960s when (some) Black Nationalists enthusiastically embrace the Moynihan report’s construction of the Black matriarch and its recommendation of a healing return to patriarchal family structure. As Victor Wolfenstein (2000) explains the Black Nationalist reasoning,

Black men lacked power in relation to white men and ...to Black women. They believed they needed to appropriate the power of the latter in order to confront the power of the former. Black women were to give over their power to black men. If they failed to do so, they were domineering matriarchs or, in a word, the word, “castrators” [p. 402].

Here, then, the Strong Black Woman image becomes a weapon in the power relations between Black men and Black women. In the 1960s, too, Radford-Hill points out, the stereotype was useful to the
cause of Black Nationalism in a different way: a strong Black woman could be counted on to bear the blows of sexism and racism and “still render service” (2002, 1086).

Collins brings the power dynamics centered on the Strong Black Woman up to date in Black Sexual Politics (2005). Because in the United States the marker of a “real man,” according to hegemonic masculinity, is control over his woman, a man who is seen as dominated by a woman “suffers a loss of manhood.” In the power contest between White and Black men, the Strong Black Woman who back-talks her man provides evidence of White male superiority, for the White male is pictured as exercising authority over his woman, as over his other subordinates. That power relation between Black and White men reverberates in the power struggles between Black men and women and can lead to domestic violence. According to Collins’s analysis,

Black men can shake the stigma of weakness by dominating unnaturally strong Black women. Being strong enough to “bring a bitch to her knees” becomes a marker of Black masculinity. ... Abusive men routinely blame their partners for their own violent behavior—if she had been more of a woman (submissive), she would have let him be more of a man [p. 189].

Thus a succession of different power dynamics perpetuates the Strong Black Woman stereotype, as her figure becomes a pawn in shifting race, gender, class, and generational power relations. The internalization of gender roles in such a situation is not simple, and it is not benign. A central point of Collins’s analysis is that Black gender roles that originally carried denigrating messages about Blacks continue to do so, unacknowledged, in their more subtle contemporary embodiments. Morgan (1999) peels off the layers of ideological transmission that eventuated in her own gender identity: “The original SBW and her alleged ‘super strength’ was a myth created by whites to rationalize their brutality. The contemporary SBW, however, is our internalization of this mythology”, “there are inherent dangers, however, ... in building an identity based on the prejudices of one’s oppressor” (pp. 101, 87). Because the progenitor of the Strong Black Woman role was a stereotype designed to justify racial oppression, internalizing the image as one’s own gender identity
must continue to serve the interests of racist ideology and so perpetuate one’s own oppression.

Yet, as in any process of interpellation, the social role has its attractions. As Morgan (1999) says of the lure of the Strong Black Woman image, “Superhuman strength was the salvageable shred of dignity remaining after sexism and racism ravaged our images” (p. 101). The Strong Black Woman image promises power (for the Strong Black Woman is above all strong) and recognition—for strength, resourcefulness, and independence are after all admirable qualities and so must command respect. As Morgan says, taking on the role appears to be a way of salvaging some dignity from the esteem-ravaging forces of sexism and racism.

But the actuality of living out the Strong Black Woman role proves otherwise. The stoicism with which Morgan repressed her own feelings in order to serve as the “dependable rock for every soul that needed me” finally resulted in a misery that expressed itself in sensations of suffocation and spells of uncontrollable weeping: “Nightly I was plagued by the absence of air, because I’d fall asleep drowning in tears” (1999, pp. 89-91). Likewise, Veronica Chambers broke down after long years of “shutting down every emotion just to survive” the mental and physical abuse she was subjected to, as well as the strain of earning straight As in school while working two jobs:

I felt weighted down by a heavy sadness. I lost my appetite. I found it impossible to sleep. ...I was afraid of all the emotions that for the last three years of college I’d tried to keep in check. I felt like I couldn’t complain about feeling tired, about feeling like I was always on my own without a safety net [1996, pp. 125, 164].

It is the feelings engendered by living the role that supply a corrective to the seemingly positive image of the Strong Black Woman: If the stress of living up to this ideal leads to physical and emotional breakdown, it is—tangibly—a damaging stereotype that calls for resistance and repair. The confession of pain is a political statement.

Indeed, Chambers’, Morgan’s, and Springer’s testimonial writing moves toward a political goal: the resistance of all Black women to the roles imposed on them by dominant ideology. Not only has Morgan herself “retired from being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN”—“for
reasons of emotional health and overall sanity” (1999, p. 85)—but she also urges her Black sisters to do the same: “Perhaps one of the most loving things sistas can do for themselves is to erase this tired obligation of super-strength. Instead, let’s claim our God/dess-given right to imperfections and vulnerability. As black women it’s time to grant ourselves our humanity” (p. 110). Like Radford-Hill hoping that she could pass on a refined model of the strong black woman identity—one that, stripped of “the unrealistic expectations” of the role, would be positive for daughters’ self-esteem—Morgan seems to be moving toward a new definition of “strong” that doesn’t signify an “inhuman” denial of neediness and psychic pain, that allows for emotional vulnerability. For all three women, liberation would come from a redefinition of what it means to be strong and Black and a woman. As Springer (2002) puts it, they insist on “opening up to the future as fallible human beings and not women of mythical proportions” (p. 1069).

The genealogy of the Strong Black Woman that emerges from the autobiographical/theoretical writings of these women supports the message carried by Collins’s historical recoveries in *Black Sexual Politics*: a process of interpellation that begins with stereotypes originally devised to justify the exploitation of Black people has to have negative effects on those who internalize gender identities derived from them. The point of Collins’s exposé of the power relations that are both source and beneficiary of Black sexual ideology is not just to inform but also to free Black people from the grip of denigrating gender roles. In Part III, especially, Collins appeals to her African American readers to resist internalizing the Black gender stereotypes that fracture self-esteem and insert discord into intimate adult relationships. And we realize from the way her tone changes from the detached objectivity of sociological inquiry and cultural critique to the more impassioned prose of a call to action that here, in her sense of the urgent need for change in personal relations, is the engine that has motivated the painstaking cultural analysis of the book’s first two thirds.

The first step in resisting damaging gender identities is to recognize them—and *Black Sexual Politics* provides the tools for this recognition. From the perspective of one’s daily life, it is not easy to see the processes of interpellation that call us into particular roles. It is, for example, difficult to penetrate the glamour of media representations of
seductive women to perceive the derogatory race and class messages that they embody. For example, the intense media focus on the buttocks (the “booty”) of stars like Beyoncé Knowles or Jennifer Lopez assigns these female figures seductive power: “Adolescent girls tap into this message of female power and head off to their eighth-grade classrooms decked in the same ‘bootylicious’ apparel” (Collins, 2005, p. 50). Female spectators are drawn to imitate such icons of femininity by the promise that internalizing the icon’s model of femininity will give them a measure of her power—the power to attract admiration and love (see de Lauretis, 1987, pp. 9-17; Wyatt, 2004, pp. 119-123). Collins points out that in the 19th century there was a similarly intense public focus on the buttocks of Sarah Bartmann, the “Hottentot Venus,” whose body was displayed to demonstrate the “uncivilized, wild [and freaky] sexuality” of African women (2005, p. 27). Masked by glamour, the message conveyed by the present-day emphasis on voluptuous bottoms, she implies, is once again that Black (and Latina) women embody an animalistic sexuality. Reduced to a body part, women of color are dehumanized. Throughout Black Sexual Politics, Collins exposes the racist content of seemingly benign or seductive gender ideals by revealing their historical provenance. She shows that racialized representations of femininity metamorphose into slightly different forms to fit the ideological needs of the moment, but the underlying stereotype remains; its staying power is explained by the continuity of the racist regime it supports. Collins’s cautionary message to Black people seems to be that if the original stereotype functioned to support unjust power relations between White and Black, its present-day incarnation, no matter how positive it may appear, also serves a racist function.

Can such a method work? Can deconstructing gender roles to reveal the power relations, historical and contemporary, that sustain them enable African Americans to reject hegemonic Black gender definitions? The hold of gender roles is difficult to shake off because gender ideology works through engaging subjectivity; gender ideology constitutes individuals as (White or Black) males and females early in life and so becomes a deeply entrenched element of self-image. A raced gender identity may be “only” a construct of social discourse, but it is nonetheless experienced as integral to one’s sense of self; it is therefore difficult to change or to extirpate (see Frosh, 1994, p. 1; Benjamin, 1998, pp. 83-90; Layton, 1998, p. 10).
What strikes me, as a fan of Collins’s earlier work on standpoint theory, is that in *Black Sexual Politics* she does not advocate group-based processes as a means to change but rather addresses her call for transformation to the individual African American reader’s consciousness. Standpoint theory maintains that people who share a particular social location look at social realities from a particular angle of vision; if they share their experiences, they can evolve a standpoint—“an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint” on social relations (Collins, 1990, p. 26). If such a standpoint is produced from a subordinated or marginalized social location—from the point of view of African American women, for example—it can provide a different angle of vision on power relations from the dominant one. So a standpoint could provide a basis for contesting the claims of dominant ideology. Although it is written rather than spoken, the interchange among the texts by Chambers, Morgan, Radford-Hill, and Springer provides a model of the kind of group dialogue that could generate a standpoint on African American gender: it enables the contours of a gender stereotype—the Strong Black Woman—to emerge from shared accounts of personal experience, facilitates the struggle toward new interpretations of customary gender relations, and moves toward a collective standpoint on a gender identity and its emotional costs.

But *Black Sexual Politics* never refers to standpoint theory or calls for a communal production of alternative knowledge to challenge dominant ideologies. It may be that Collins has turned away from theories of social group positioning and the knowledge that a shared subject position can generate because identity politics, arguably an offshoot of standpoint theory, has disappointed her, as she makes clear in *Black Sexual Politics*: Collins criticizes groups founded on identity politics for being essentialist and exclusionary, for constructing a narrow definition of Blackness and then excluding those who do not fit (2005, p. 297).

Whatever the reason, Collins’s call for liberation from imprisonment in Black gender stereotypes is addressed not to the collective but to the individual, to the uncolonized area of individual consciousness. To develop an “honest body” and honest intimate relationships, one must “interrogate one’s own individual consciousness”—which, Collins maintains, remains “a sphere of freedom”—“because no organization, television network, hip-hop artist, or love
partner can ever fully control what each of us thinks” (2005, p. 283). That statement constitutes quite a leap of faith in individual mental freedom from a cultural theorist who has just devoted 280 pages to the colonization of Black minds by, precisely, organizations, hip-hop artists, and media representations. She goes on, “As individuals, we each have the power to reject prevailing ideas about gender and sexuality and to think about our bodies differently” (p. 283).

Collins seems to be expressing her own belief in the power of knowledge to effect change. On the subject that engages her most intense concern, the love relationships between African American partners, she demonstrates her faith in the power of critical analysis. Steeped in the negative images of weak Black men and strong Black women, she says, African American couples often turn the dissatisfactions produced by a racist system into anger toward each other: “When internalized by African Americans themselves, the gender ideology [of “weak men and strong women”] works to erase the workings of racial discrimination by keeping Black men and Black women focused on blaming one another for problems” (2005, p. 180). But she implies that becoming educated about the ideological strategies behind Black gender roles can heal these relationships: “The chances for mutual recognition and understanding become greater within love relationships in which both partners recognize how the structure of racism harms both Black men and Black women, and does so through gender-specific mechanisms” (p. 252).

However skeptical a psychoanalytic background might make a reader about the power of reasoned discourse to change raced gender roles that are learned early and culturally reinforced, one has to acknowledge that Collins has given her readers the critical tools for the cultural work it takes to unpack the racial messages embodied in dominant gender representations, as well as, more obscurely, in one’s own gender identity. From the perspective of daily life, it is difficult to perceive the contours of a gender stereotype that has become part of one’s own identity—and it is even more difficult to ascertain whose interests are served by the gender role one is living out. Collins’s painstaking analysis of how a particular gender role interacts with class, sexuality, and race stereotypes to support structures of White dominance provides her reader with a leg up to a more inclusive perspective on his or her own gender identity and the power relations it sustains.
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