Traps
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Rayford Logan, the great black historian, called the period at the turn of the last century the nadir for black people. Hundreds of blacks were lynched, thousands were victims of racist violence and intimidation, and literally millions were exploited on farms and at mostly menial labor where their pay failed to cover the food and other necessities they were often required to purchase from their employers.

For Dr. Logan, the nadir meant the bottom, a status that arguably was only a small step up from slavery itself. It is a measure of the fragility of our current condition that a great many thoughtful black people now worry that we are heading toward another nadir, this one marked by far more self-destruction than anyone living a century ago could easily imagine. The statistics supporting these concerns are all too familiar. Maya Angelou transforms them into words that highlight the pain of our plight:

In these bloody days and frightful nights when an urban warrior can find no face more despicable than his own, no ammunition more deadly than self-hate and no target more deserving of his true aim than his brother, we must wonder how we came so late and lonely to this place.

If African Americans are to survive the storms we are now experiencing—and those storms now brewing on the horizon—we must reconnect ourselves, eschewing in the process divisive behaviors that distract us from the dangers lurking outside our community. dangers we know all too well and
It is sad but hardly remarkable that oppressed black people vent far more of their rage on other blacks than on their oppressors. The very power that defines the status of those on the top and those on the bottom serves to deflect frustrated rage from the perpetrators of oppression to fellow sufferers. Diversion is now, and likely has always been, an important tactic in preventing the oppressed from recognizing the true sources of their oppression. Those in power recognize the value of diversion to redirect victim rage away from themselves and seldom miss the chance to promote its paranoid permutations.

Once sown, the seeds of distrust and enmity seem to flourish on their own. Those in power need do no more than appear to favor one subordinate group over another to quell even a possibility that the feuding groups will either recognize the similar character of their lowly state or identify the source of their condition. The lowly ones engage in spirited expressions of hostility against each other, exhausting time, energy, and resources that might otherwise be employed against their oppressors. In the process, their squabbling provides their real enemies with a seemingly impenetrable insulation from intergroup strife among those who, while fearing their differences, are quite similar in their subordination. Subordination, by its very nature, generates beliefs and behaviors that lead to antagonism among subordinate groups. Victims often look for the less powerful and attempt to victimize them in turn. Those harmed seek to retaliate, and soon there is a vicious cycle of hostility that creates disorder and chaos among victims of the status quo while serving to ensure the position of those in power.

The stability and even the survival of the economic system in this country depends on maintaining divisions between people based on race, gender, and class. The success of this strategy can be measured in the fact that (for example) there is little outcry about the gap in income and wealth between the rich and the rest of us, even though this gap is larger than at any time in this century. The reason is not hard to find. Those at the short end of the income and wealth gap are easily convinced that they should vent their otherwise unfocused upset on those on welfare, newly arrived immigrants, those who commit street crimes, and the society's traditional scapegoat—black people. A great many whites across the socioeconomic spectrum are vocal in their opposition to affirmative action policies that they view as aiding less qualified members of minorities at their expense; there is no similar opposition to all manner of priorities and preferences aimed at privileging those who are already well-off.

It would be a most welcome but quite unlikely miracle if black people, we who from our earliest days in this country have occupied the very bottom of society's well, were able to avoid the victim's predisposition to battle others within our group rather than those responsible for our lowly status. Alas, it is likely that because of our long history of subordinate status in this country we are more rather than less prone to this affliction. Because sexism and patriarchy are deeply rooted in this society, all too many black men have fallen
into patterns of physical and emotional abuse of women, behavior that black women understandably fear and resent.

For a generation now, a host of writers—many of them black women—have been telling the world about the inadequacies of black men. This often emotional testimony ranges from mournful frustration to flat-out rage. These revelations contain both deeply felt disappointment about what often is and a yearning hope about what might be. And while there are many, many black males who do not fit the woeful patterns, we know from statistics and personal experience that these criticisms are based in reality as well as myth. Rather than either condone or condemn, I want to examine this phenomenon in the context of a society where the deflection of oppression is the norm.

Who can deny it? Life for black men in racist America is devilishly difficult. Surely, a factor in our failings is the hostility we encounter at every level. While slavery is over, a racist society continues to exert dominion over black men and their maleness in ways more subtle but hardly less castrating than during slavery, when male-female relationships between black people generally were not formalized, and even when a marriage was recognized, the black man’s sexual access to his wife was controlled by the master or his sons or his overseer.

Black women also suffered the pains of slavery. Black women were exploited, abused, and demeaned, and that harm was serious. Forced to submit to the sexual desires of their masters or to slaves selected by their masters, they then suffered the agony of watching helplessly as their children were sold off. Black men were also dealt a double blow. They were forced to stand by powerless and unable to protect black women from sexual access by white men, and they were denied access to white women as a further symbol of their subordinate status. The harm done black men by this dual assault has never been fully assessed. Moreover, the assault continues in less blatant but still potent forms.

James Baldwin asserts that “the action of the White Republic, in the lives of Black men, has been, and remains, emasculation. Hence, the Republic has absolutely no image, or standard, of masculinity to which any man, Black or White, can honorably aspire.” The vain effort to protect black males against this ever-present danger, Baldwin explains, results in what Andy Young calls “sorriness,” a disease that attacks black males. Baldwin writes:

It is transmitted by Mama, whose instinct—and it is not hard to see why—is to protect the Black male from the devastation that threatens him the moment he declares himself a man. All of our mothers, and all of our women, live with this small, doom-laden bell in the skull, silent, waiting, or resounding, every hour of every day. Mama lays this burden on Sister, from whom she expects far more than she expects from Brother; but one of the results of this all too comprehensible dynamic is that Brother may never grow up—in which case, the community has become an accomplice to the Republic.
Women may well respond that here is one more effort, albeit a well-written one, to blame male failure on female love. There is a chicken and egg aspect to this position. This society has not much loved either black men or black women, and debate as to whether society's hostility or parental efforts to shield males from this hostility is more damaging does not move us much closer toward the relief that both need. Even so, in Baldwin's view, "this dilemma has everything to do with the situation of the Black man in the American inferno."

Black women do not accept racism as the reason for sorrow behavior—they have experienced it firsthand, and for them it is an excuse, not a justification. Alice Walker's character Grange Copeland speaks her mind on this subject:

I'm bound to believe that that's the way white folks can corrupt you even when you done held up before. 'Cause when they got you thinking that they're to blame for everything they have you thinking they's some kind of gods! You can't do nothing wrong without them being behind it. You gits just as weak as water, no feeling of doing nothing yourself. Then you begins to think up evil and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blames it on the crack- ers. Shit! Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls, don't we?"

In addition to rejecting the traditional, patriarchal notion that women must be protected by men, black women cannot see why black men must try to emulate the macho sexism of their white counterparts rather than work toward a more natural and healthy equality between the sexes. As a woman student wrote in an essay, quoting Fran Sanders's "Dear Black Man,"

Talk to me like the woman that I am and not to me as that woman who is the inanimate creation of someone's overactive imagination. Look at me with no preconceived notions of how I must act or feel and I will try to do the same with you. No presumption, no assumptions, no banal rhetoric substituted for real person-to-person giving and receiving. Look at my face when you speak to me; look into my eyes and see what they have to say. Think about the answers that you give to my questions. . . . I am a woman and you are a man and I have always known it. If you love me, tell me so. Don't approach me as you would an enemy. I am on your side and have always been. We have survived, and we may just be able to teach the world a lesson."

That, of course, is a wonderful homily of how life should be for sexual partners, regardless of race. It is an ideal, and as is obvious from the charges and countercharges, a far from fulfilled ideal for many black men and women. It can hardly be denied that black women bear much of the brunt of black male frustration and suppressed rage.

During my twenty-five years of law school teaching, I have listened to dozens of black women—and more than a few white ones—voice their disappointments with many black men. Much of the problem is due to the paucity of black men at the professional level rather than to their behavior. The statistics regarding the number of black men who fall by the wayside long before professional school are harsh. Most law school classes contain
many more black women than men. This disparity heightens black women’s sense of betrayal when potentially available black men choose white women. As one of my students put it, “We black women are always being reminded of how marginal and unworthy we are. We’re never smart enough or beautiful enough or supportive, sexy, understanding, and resourceful enough to deserve a good black man.”

Another former student, Kirsten Levingston, makes clear that she would not encourage a black woman to stay with a black man if he made her unhappy, nor would she discourage a black man from marrying a white woman who makes him happy. Even so, she believes black Americans must do all they can to unite and develop. This unity begins at home with our children, and, she contends, “the key to producing strong and proud black children is to raise them in an environment with strong and proud black parents.”10 Ms. Levingston’s call for unity may be unrealistic in a society where one-half of all marriages end in divorce, but hers is a view shared by many, perhaps most, black women.

Recently, while discussing this issue in a civil rights class, two black women prepared a fictional dialogue among friends regarding interracial relationships. As reported by the black woman commentator, the black and white law students discussed the tendency of handsome and promising black men to prefer or at least look with admiration on white women, while disliking ethnic hair styles and other Afrocentric “looks” on black women. They raised the often unspoken question regarding black women’s suspicion that any expression of interest in them by white men is based on the stereotype of black women as super-sensual, and discussed the refusal of some black women to date white men for that reason. The narrator shares this concern, but feels trapped by it because the “bottom line is that there just aren’t enough brothers to go around.” She recognizes that many black men are not very sensitive to this dilemma, resent black women who date white men, and sometimes ask, “How come a garbage collector isn’t good enough for you?” The fictional group discusses several variations on this theme and then the narrator closes with this observation:

As I took a sip from my wine glass, I realized that there were no definitive answers. I could say I am black, female, and bright in a white mediocre world, but that hardly explains why I sit on the beaches of St. Croix feeling so abandoned.

In the same class, a young Indian woman, after conceding the burdening nature of male hegemony in Indian culture, posed the question,

Why is it that struggle and racial adversity create strong black women and “weak and disempowered” black men? The African-American female has fewer job opportunities and just as many stereotypes heaped upon her as does the African-American male. Why does the most oppressed class, women of color, derive strength from oppression, whereas black men may scapegoat oppression to justify unjustifiable behavior (often against women of color).
Both my student’s question and the issue deserve to be more firmly grounded in the societal environment out of which they come. I shared my student’s observations with a black social worker friend, Gwen Jordan, who felt that the Indian woman posed an ultimate dilemma for all people of color. When we attempt to work through the difficulties in relationships that are fundamental to the preservation of our culture and well-being in public, within the view of others who do not share our cultural issues, we unconsciously place that struggle in the context of an alien culture whose values and mores do not support—and are often hostile to—the core of our definition and being. And then it is from this perspective that we evaluate and judge the quality of these relationships and the sincerity of our mates.

In Ms. Jordan’s view, African-Americans in their relationships must struggle to achieve a level of unconditional love in a systemic context—racism—which places conditions upon our being. Within that context, we trivialize ourselves when we attempt to define African-American male/female relationships in terms of the prevailing culture: we attribute to black females mystical powers and strengths that become burdensome in their superficiality, and we attribute weakness and defeat to black males. These, according to Jordan, are really just more sophisticated versions of the stereotypes that we have carried since slavery. The result is that we disempower ourselves and imperil our capacity to love unconditionally and, through that love, to grow and create together.

The threat of disempowerment is certainly real, but the effort to define differences can be both revealing and strengthening in our understanding of how we function as male and female human beings. James Baldwin, for example, provides an enlightening statement about the psychological makeup of men and their weakness, too often masked by a show of muscle and—it must be said—all too often manifested in the physical abuse of those very women who would, if given a chance, love and care for them. Baldwin writes:

One is confronted, first of all, with the universal mystery of men—as we are, of a man, as he is; with the legend and the reality of the masculine force and the masculine role—though these last two realities are not always the same. Men would seem to dream more than women do—always have, it would seem, and very probably, always will. They must, since they assume that their role is to alter and conquer reality. If women dream less than men—for men know very little about a woman’s dreams—it is certainly because they are so swiftly confronted with the reality of men. They must accommodate this indispensable creature, who is, in so many ways, more fragile than a woman. Women know much more about men than men will ever know about women—which may, at bottom, be the only reason that the race has managed to survive so long.

In any case, the male cannot bear very much humiliation; and he really cannot bear it, it obliterates him. All men know this about each other, which is one of the reasons that men can treat each other with such a vile, relentless, and endlessly inventive cruelty. Also, however, it must be added, with such depthless respect and love, conveyed mainly by grunts and blows. It has often
seemed to me that men need each other in order to deal with women, and 
women, God knows, must need each other in order to deal with men. 

Women manage, quite brilliantly, on the whole, and to stunning and un-
foreseeable effect, to survive and surmount being defined by others. They 
dismiss the definition, however dangerous or wounding it may be—or even, 
sometimes, find a way to utilize it—perhaps because they are not dreaming. 
But men are neither so supple nor so subtle. A man fights for his manhood: 
that's the bottom line. A man does not have, simply, the weapons of a woman. 
Mama must feed her children—that's another bottom line; and there is a level 
on which it can be said that she cannot afford to care how she does it. 

But when a man cannot feed his women or his children, he finds it, literally, 
impossible to face them. The song says, Now, when a woman gets the blues, 
Lord/She hangs her head and cries/But when a man gets the blues, Lord/He 
grabs a train and rides.\textsuperscript{11}

Even we black men fortunate enough to provide for our families must 
defend against the myriad forms of emasculation that the society has placed 
in our path. Success as the society measures it exacts a very real and often 
terrible price. None of us escapes, really, and those of us who feel we have 
established some limits to what we will put up with spend far more time than 
we should criticizing those who, by our measures, have been too willing to 
comfort whites in order to either get ahead or (usually) stay even. 

Baldwin, I think, would urge more understanding—if not compassion— 
as he reminds us:

\begin{quote}
It is a very grave matter to be forced to imitate a people for whom you know—
which is the price of your performance and survival—you do not exist. It is 
hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable 
by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Writer Jill Nelson speaks for many of us, men as well as women, when she 
describes how difficult it is to maintain one's ethical bearings in the job 
market. Following a series of interviews at a major, white newspaper that was 
considering her as a reporter, she wrote:

\begin{quote}
I've been doing the standard Negro balancing act when it comes to dealing 
with white folks, which involves sufficiently blurring the edges of my being so 
that white folks don't feel intimidated and simultaneously holding on to my 
integrity. There is a thin line between Uncle Tomming and Mau-Mauing. To 
step over that line can mean disaster. On one side lies employment and self-
hatred, on the other, the equally dubious honor of unemployment with integ-
rrity. In the middle lies something like employment with honor, although I'm 
not sure exactly how that works.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Jill Nelson got the job. Even so, it was a constant hassle, which she writes 
about with pain-filled humor. Increasingly, blacks—men and women—are 
not getting these jobs, or much of any work. The optimist might hope that 
frustrated employment hopes might bring humility and compassion to the 
Donnelis of this world and their less talented brethren. Alas, for all the rea-
sons Baldwin asserts, it usually does not. And it is unlikely that the relations between some black men and black women will improve until societal conditions improve. Even so, we must not ignore the fact that despite all the barriers, a great many—dare we say most?—black men marry and stay with their wives and families through thick and thin. Here, again, Baldwin says it well:

A stranger to this planet might find the fact that there are any Black people at all still alive in America something to write home about. I myself find it remarkable not that so many Black men were forced (and in so many ways!) to leave their families, but that so many remained and aided their issue to grow and flourish.14

This positive observation provides an important foundation on which to plan the coming struggle for our survival in a society in transition, one that appears more than ready to sacrifice our interests, our well-being, even our lives, in a desperate effort to avoid the dangers inherent in change. The black man/black woman debate should continue, but participants must be aware of the ever-present temptation of diversion and its potential to twist that debate in a way that comforts our enemies and betrays ourselves.

NOTES

1. Typical are the figures issued by the U.S. Justice Department, reporting that young black men were almost 14 times more likely to be murdered during 1992 than the nation’s general population. In that year, black males ages twelve to twenty-four were victims of homicide at a rate of 114.9 per 100,000, compared with 8.5 murder victims per 100,000 of the general population. They constituted 17.7 percent of all homicide victims, even though they were only 1.3 percent of the U.S. population. Black males age sixteen to twenty-four, were 1.5 times more likely to be victims of all types of violent crime (source: “Around the Nation,” Washington Post, 9 December 1994, A = 10).


4. Ibid., 19.

5. Ibid., 20.


8. Compare Wallace, “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” in All the Blacks Are Men, All the Women Are White, but Some of Us Are Brave, ed. G. T. Hull et al. (1982), 5–8 (“Whenever I raised the question of a Black woman’s humanity in conversation with a Black man, I got a similar reaction. Black men, at least the ones I know, seemed totally confounded when it came to treating Black women like people”), with Staples, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” Black Scholar, March/April 1979, 24–32 (While black males are not free of sexism, most black men lack the institutionalized power to oppress black men, and it is their lowly societal position that most disturbs black males).

12. Ibid., 44.