

## Chapter 1

**Introduction to the African American Experience***Aaron Thompson*

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Readers of this textbook are most likely taking a course called The African American Experience. From my perspective as a sociologist and someone who has spent three decades in higher education, HIGHER EDUCATION MATTERS! Insight and knowledge are the paths for success in people of all races and classes. The family is where these paths begin. The Black family is a family of strengths and diversity. Growth and success can take place within our institution regardless of the structural make up. To make this growth and success possible, we need to know the truth of our history, knowledge of the structure, the courage to seek assistance, and the strength to lend assistance.

Being poor, Black, and Appalachian did not offer me great odds for success, but constant reminders from my parents that I was a good and valuable person helped me to see beyond my deterrents to the true importance of education. My parents, who could never provide me with monetary wealth, truly made me proud of them by giving me the gift of insight and an aspiration for achievement. To close opportunity and achievement gaps, we need to have a strong early childhood education through a strong postsecondary education. We can start by (1) Teaching our children the importance of education for the sake of knowledge as well as for economic survival; (2) Appreciating cultural and economic diversity (understanding that race and class are social mechanisms for prejudice and discrimination); and (3) Teaching our children to look beyond the limitations that society might have placed on them so as to build on steps one and two. This textbook aims to provide a foundation in these areas, among others.

Many Black families throughout the United States face seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and the future seems to be a shadow rather than a reality. Many live in conditions of poverty and many in one-parent households. But as my mother always

said, "If you listen to the morals that are being taught to you, throw out the ones with hatred, and just learn how to count your money; then you will do okay in life." My mother seems to have the perfect answer to many of the problems of our society in this one statement. But as we all know, when many of us were growing up, there was very little money to count. Today, with both mother and father doing paid labor, it is harder for parents to give the direct attention to children that my mother showered on me. This issue could become problematic since socializing our children to understand that education is the important route to success usually starts in the family at an early age. Economics can be the culprit in the successes and failures of our children in this society. With education, success is not assured, but without education, failure seems imminent.

Even if African Americans are strong academically, research shows that because they are more disadvantaged economically, there is a greater chance they may not pursue and continue an education. Many roots of these problems lie in the legacy of slavery and the power of racism; the impediments to gaining these necessary skills are rooted in the history of Black America.<sup>1</sup> Black Americans and their families have faced segregation, discrimination, and inequalities throughout the history of industrial America. When compared to Whites, Blacks were more often faced with discriminatory laws, individually and in the family structure. Under slave law, Black women, Black men, and their children were the property of slave owners. Although during the slavery era there were many freed married Blacks, family units under slavery existed at the slave master's discretion. People could marry, but property could not, and slaves were considered property. Although many slaves defied this law and got married within their own community, slave owners could destroy this bond at any time they saw a need to do so by merely selling one or both of the partners to different slave owners.

After slavery, Whites created formal and informal laws for the domination of Black labor, a labor they once owned. These "Jim Crow" laws were enacted after Reconstruction. These laws as much as anything else fostered an ideology of Blacks as

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<sup>1</sup> B.T. Dill, "The dialectics of Black womanhood," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4, (1979): 543-555.

subordinate and Whites as superordinate. These laws also contributed to a division of labor by sexes in the Black family, as well as placing barriers to the formation of Black two-parent households. For example, if a Black woman married a Black man, then the property she owned would go to him. Since the laws stated that property could be owned only by males, women did not relish the idea of working to give property to a male, so many decided to remain unmarried. If the Black husband did not have a job, then the state could take his property. Of course, there was a good chance that the Black male would not have a job, so many marriages did not take place. Thus, with the barriers to the Black family being an intact family unit, there was a greater chance for poverty in the Black community. Black women faced a dismal prospect for survival above the poverty level because they needed to find a job that could support them and, in many cases, their children. The state made laws stipulating that if Black parents could not afford to care for their children, then the children could be apprenticed out as free labor. When girls were apprenticed out, most went to White households as domestic help. When boys were apprenticed out, they went as outside manual laborers such as blacksmiths. These divisions reflected a wider labor market distinction between men and women as well as the distinctions made in the African American community.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, there is a difference between the family structures of Black Americans and White Americans. The work roles inside and outside the households offer one gendered difference. American plantation slavery did not make a distinction between the work performed by Black men and that done by Black women. Both worked in the fields and both worked within the household doing domestic labor. Gender role expectations were very different for Black and White women. Black women were not seen as weak; in fact, they were seen as being able to work in the fields, have a baby in the evening, and cook breakfast the next day.<sup>3</sup> Black men also experienced

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<sup>2</sup> E. Boris & P. Bardaglio, "Gender, race, and class: The impact of the state on the family and the economy, 1790-1945," in *Families and work*, ed. Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Engel (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010).

different gender role expectations than did White men. Under slavery, the Black male understood that both he and his family (whatever family could exist at this point) were at the service of the White family.

In the late 1800s when there was a need for more women in the work force, laws were loosened to include this need. These laws had a significant effect on the White family but very little effect on the Black family. Later, when Black family members moved into the industrial sector, they went into the paid labor market at a different pace and level than the White family. Black women most often were paid less than Black men or White women, and they always maintained jobs in the paid labor market as servants, seamstresses, laundresses, and other domestic positions. Black women were not allowed to serve as salesclerks, cashiers, bookkeepers, and other clerical jobs, which were filled by many White women in the labor market. In 1900, Black women constituted approximately 20 percent of the female population and were 23 percent of the servant population. By 1920 they were 40 percent of the servant population. As the twentieth century continued, the Black female servant demographic proportionally grew compared to other populations.<sup>4</sup>

Black men who had job skills in many cases could not practice those skills. For example, Blacks were not allowed to join many of the trade unions in the South where most Blacks lived. The United Mine Workers Union in the South used Blacks as strikebreakers but experience difficulties getting Black members accepted as regular union members. Thus, in many cases Blacks who worked as miners remained outside the union, with inadequate pay compared to the White union members.<sup>5</sup> Because of a history of discriminatory laws undermining family structure, the Black family did not have a support system going into the paid labor market. Often there were no husbands in the family. Black women could not depend economically on men because many did not have husbands or their husbands faced a labor market that discriminated against

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<sup>4</sup> A. Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: An Historical Overview*. Old Westbury (NY: Feminist Press; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black family in slavery and freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

them. This lack of labor force participation by the Black male led the Black female to see him as a liability to her and her children, which further undermined the Black family structure. To survive in the labor market, Black women would accept any job to support their family, but the jobs that were available were the traditionally "female-specific" jobs such as house cleaners, cooks, nannies, and other domestic roles. The few jobs that were available to Black men were also jobs that were of a domestic nature. These jobs tended to pay less than jobs that were reserved for the White male.

In early industrial America, a family wage system was enacted. A family wage system is one that is designed to pay enough money to the male in the paid labor force to support him and his family. This system allowed the woman to stay in the household and the man to stay in the paid labor force with the title of "head of household." Although laws stated that men were heads of households, Black men could not assert themselves as the undeniable heads of their households if they did not have the economic ability to back their claims. Thus, a pattern of single female-headed households started in the Black family. Black men clearly did not and could not make a family wage for their family, and so Black women continued to work. Since Black men did not have the political or economic power structure on their side to help keep their families intact, the patriarchal father was not as dominant in the Black household as he was in the White family.

White women and Black women shared the burden of being forced to be in domestic positions in the home, and when they had to get paying jobs, they were forced to occupy sex-typed jobs in the labor market. The difference here is that the family wage White women depended upon was considerably higher than the wage Black women enjoyed or expected. Without a doubt, Black women in the United States have not been able to depend on a constant family wage; thus, they never have.

Black women have headed their households for most of the twentieth century and have been accustomed to accepting all kinds of jobs throughout their lives to support their families. Black men are still experiencing unemployment and underemployment, and when they do obtain jobs, the majority of jobs are in the

secondary labor market or in work that many White men would not accept. Going into the twenty-first century, Black female-headed households comprise approximately 54 percent of all Black families with children. This percentage was almost as high as the total Black male paid labor force participation. Currently, it is difficult for a Black woman to obtain enough education to increase her chances in the labor market; yet, she still surpasses the Black male in gaining these necessary resources. With the Black male's inability to break the barriers of institutional racism, it is extremely hard to attain and sustain the ideal of a dual-career Black family.

Women as a whole are getting more education, and dual-earner marriages are the norm in America now instead of single-earner marriages. Children expect to see their mothers as well as their fathers working outside the household and supporting the family financially. This shift will likely bring about a change in the structure of the family. Hopefully, more egalitarian conditions for males and females will emerge. However, the Black family, in general, remains financially unstable when compared to the White family. Black women are not experiencing the same level of newfound freedom in the paid labor market that White women are beginning to find. Black men are still underemployed or unemployed when compared to their White counterparts. Until Black workers reach a point in our society where they are operating on the same footing as the White workers (e.g., equal education, equal employment, equal pay), Blacks will be hard pressed to advance equitably in the twenty-first century with an egalitarian balance in the family and work. Labor market participation, low wages for both sexes, and discriminatory laws have affected the Black family structure, producing the large number of households headed by a woman. The family is the primary institution for socialization in our society, and this is where we should start looking for answers and providing solutions.

Reflecting on the history of Black men and women in the United States, Black poet Margaret Walker observed, "Handicapped as we have been by a racist system of dehumanizing slavery and segregation, our American history of nearly five hundred years reveals that our cultural and spiritual gifts brought from our African past are still

intact.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, from the transatlantic slave trade of the fifteenth century through the twenty-first century, African Americans have suffered the injustices of systemic racism and White supremacy. Yet, Black history is not just a story of oppression, but one of resilience and resistance. As Walker notes, it is also not a story that begins with slavery, but in Africa. This African legacy not only survived the brutality of American history, but shaped the development of America itself, as Black men and women contributed to the nation’s history, culture, politics, military, and society from its inception. It is not an exaggeration to say that African American history is American history.

The African American experience was, and is, one shaped not just by race, but by class, gender, sexuality, time, and place. The experience of Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved poet who lived in Boston in the 1770s was quite different from the experience of enslaved women on rice plantations in South Carolina’s Gullah coast. In the 1960s, the experience of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr., the son of a middle-class preacher from Georgia, was quite different from that of Black Panther Fred Hampton, the son of working-class parents in Chicago. Yet, as diverse as the African American experience has always been, a shared racial experience transcends the lines of class, gender, time, and place. Regardless of their social status, economic success, or intellectual prowess, even the most successful African Americans combatted the same discrimination, inequality, and oppression based solely on what W.E.B. DuBois termed “the color line.” Thus, part of a shared African American experience, from the transatlantic slave trade through Jim Crow and beyond, centers on racial oppression.

Focused broadly on the themes of oppression and resistance, this book covers a myriad of the African American experience, from the African roots of “Gumbo Dancing” to contemporary Black politics. Intentionally interdisciplinary, this book features scholars from diverse fields such as art history, education,

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<sup>6</sup> Maryemma Graham, ed., *On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker, 1932-1992* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

religion, history, military studies, music, and public health. The essays in this book are designed to introduce undergraduates and the general public to the historical and contemporary issues surrounding African American studies, as well as to provide fresh insights into traditionally neglected topics.