

On the Issue of Roles*

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In the last few years I have frequently been asked to speak on the topic of the Black Woman's Role in the Revolution. Invariably I get a little tongue tied at the outset, trying to clarify some of the difficulties I have even coping with the title. What Black woman did you have in mind? Each of us, after all, has particular skills and styles that suit us for particular tasks in the struggle. I'm not altogether sure we agree on the term "revolution" or I wouldn't be having so much difficulty with the phrase "woman's role." I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine," not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandising nonsense, but rather because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about—and what revolution for self is all about—the whole person. And I am beginning to see, especially lately, that the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to full development. And that is a shame, for a revolutionary must be capable of, above all, total self-autonomy.

I don't know if there are any viable models in pre-capitalist, non-white societies. I don't know that I can trust the anthropological studies that attempt to illuminate and interpret just how the sexes operated in so-called primitive societies, or just how the self was viewed. For much of the work I run across is either written by white males steeped in the misogynistic and capitalistic tradition, which means that the material is always slanted to reinforce the myth of male superiority, female inferiority, and separation and antagonism between the sexes; or written by women with

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axes to grind so that the material is always slanted to "prove" that woman in the so-called primitive societies were dominant and warlike. When I am left to my own devices—and I am neither a man nor a woman who wishes to be a man—I tend to find no particularly rigid work assignments based on sex. The pre-capitalist, non-white life style seems to be worth checking out. For it sheds some light on the madness of "masculinity" and "femininity," even though it may not offer us any model at this time in history.

Generally speaking, in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods. The move for centuries has been to render her a subordinate being, a background figure, to regard her as a self-sacrificing mother, a loving wife, a generous sex mate, a passive, retiring, physically delicate, not too bright but oftentimes devious and cunning member of the household, teaching profession, or secretary pool; one who needs constant protection and guidance, for she has a lascivious nature that must be curbed; one who is not capable of major economic, political, or social decisions other than choosing Del Monte over Brand X; one who is not capable of serious artistic or creative contributions other than blowing up like Moby Dick and dropping squalling babies; one who risks mental derangement or at least emotional imbalance or "unfemininity" should she elect a profession that puts her in competition with men or should she be crazy enough to fashion for herself a life as something other than the appendage of some man. If the shamans of this culture, the writers and dramatists, are anything to go by—she is either a marketable virgin or a potential whore, but certainly the enemy of men.

Now, we tend to argue that all that is a lot of honky horseshit. But unfortunately, we have not been immune to the conditioning; we are just as jammed in the rigid confines of those basically oppressive socially contrived roles. For if a woman is tough, she's a rough mamma, a strident bitch, a ballbreaker, a castrator. And if a man is at all sensitive, tender, spiritual, he's a faggot. And there is a dangerous trend observable in some quarters of the Movement to program Sapphire out of her "evil" ways into a cover-up, shut-up, lay-back-and-be-cool obedience role. She is being assigned an unreal role of mute servant that supposedly neutralizes the acidic tension that exists between Black men and Black women. She is being encour-

aged—in the name of the revolution no less—to cultivate “virtues” that if listed would sound like the personality traits of slaves. In other words, we are still abusing each other, aborting each other’s nature—in the teeth of experiences both personal and historical that should alert us to the horror of a situation in which we profess to be about liberation but behave in a constricting manner; we rap about being correct but ignore the danger of having one half of our population regard the other with such condescension and perhaps fear that that half finds it necessary to “reclaim his manhood” by denying her her peoplehood. Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood. We have much, alas, to work against. The job of purging is staggering. It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle.

The argument goes that the man is the breadwinner and the subject, the woman the helpmate and the object because that is the nature of the sexes, because that is the way it’s always been, and just because. And yet my readings of Africa, Asia, the South Seas, and America (pre-white man)—sporadic at best, sloppy at worst—tells me that cultures have conceived of man/woman in a variety of ways, that “human nature” is a pretty malleable quality. And I am convinced, at least in my readings of African societies, that prior to the European obsession of property as a basis for social organization, and prior to the introduction of Christianity, a religion fraught with male anxiety and villification of women, communities were equalitarian and cooperative. The woman was neither subordinate nor dominant, but a sharer in policymaking and privileges, had mobility and opportunity and dignity. And while it would seem she had certain tasks to perform and he particular duties to attend, there were no hard and fixed assignments based on gender, no rigid and hysterical separation based on sexual taboos. She often accompanied him on hunts and donned warrior gear on the battlefield, and he frequently participated in food gathering and in the education of the young.

There is nothing to indicate that the African woman, who ran the marketplace, who built dams, who engaged in international commerce and diplomacy, who sat on thrones, who donned armor to wage battle against the European invaders and the corrupt chieftains who engaged in

the slave trade, who were consulted as equals in the affairs of state—nothing to indicate that they were turning their men into faggots, were victims of penis envy, or any such nonsense. There is nothing to indicate that the Sioux, Seminole, Iroquois or other “Indian” nations felt oppressed or threatened by their women, who had mobility, privileges, a voice in the governing of the commune. There is evidence, however, that the European white was confused and alarmed by the equalitarian system of these societies and did much to wreck it, creating wedges between the men and women. It’s anybody’s pessimistic guess as to what impact the Yankee mentality will have on the harmonious relationships that have developed among the Vietnamese men and women bound together, under fire, committed to common struggle to liberate their nation. Certainly the huge body of poems and love letters pouring out of that country reveal that men are congratulating their women who shoot guns, bear babies, build bridges, keep the village fires going, plot out strategy, and bury the dead; just as it is obvious the women celebrate their men who dig booby traps, feed the infants and the aged, impale G.I.s, write love poems and the like.

If there is any area that is crucial in the Black Studies or Third World Curriculum it is the study of the destructive and corruptive white presence. We think we know; we feel we’ve been sensitized long enough to really know. But we really ought to check it out with thoroughness. The cooperative community under the matriarchal system was disrupted when the concept of property was introduced in the Motherland. Property led to class divisions which disrupted the communal society. To guarantee the transmission of property, patrilinear inheritance was adopted. To ensure a clear line of inheritance, the woman’s liberty and mobility, especially sexual, was curtailed through monogamy. The nuclear family cut her off from the larger society and turned this homebody into nobody. To keep everything running smoothly, he was taught that it was his natural obligation as a man to support his family, she that it was her natural obligation as a woman to serve the family. Just as the “natives” became the white man’s burden, his property, she became the man’s burden, his Mrs., and the children became the parents’ burden.

To be sure, this is a rather simplistic recap of history, but it is sufficiently sound to launch an argument against “that is the nature of the sexes” and “that’s the way it’s always been.” Of course, Christianity helped to reinforce many of the above pathological conditions. The

whole story of Genesis is but one example of the white man's hatred and mistrust of his woman. That Eve should be born of man—stranger yet, that she owes her existence to a spare rib—is typical not only of the white man's attempt to render her Other, but also illustrates his disharmony with the natural. In the drama of the Fall, she plays the villain, the vile creature who doomed us all to sinful lives. She plays the role yet in film after film, instigating crimes, manipulating poor saps who don't really want to rob and murder but who are as helpless against her wiles as poor Adam was. The genocidal bloodbath of centuries and centuries of witch hunts sheds some light on the hysterical attitude white men have regarding their women. Unfortunately, it tainted the relationships of men and women in Africa and in exile. Just as the notions of Heaven and Hell, the elect and the damned, reinforced elitism. And the notion of sainthood through martyrdom, submission, and the embrace of death moved us all farther and farther from our once harmonious relationship with the self and nature.

All this to say what? To say that we would do well to reclaim the old relationships. Fortunately, remnants of the old way persist on the continent. For example, in the Cameroons, I've been told, every woman of adult age is referred to as Mother. That is the way in a communal society with no hang-ups about "mine." And a friend living there for a while was teased daily for asking, "Which is your child? Which one is your mother?" We're so turned around about Western models, we don't even know how to raise the correct questions. But raise them we must if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other. What are we talking about when we speak of revolution if not a free society made up of whole individuals? I'm not arguing the denial of manhood or womanhood, but rather a shifting of priorities, a call for Selfhood, Blackhood. When Father Divine launched his program, the Peace Mission Movement, the first thing he insisted upon from the novitiate was a shifting from malehood and femalehood to Angelhood. If that program owed its success to anything, it owed it to the kind of shift in priorities. I don't know what the long-range program was regarding sex, but I tend to agree that celibacy for a time is worth considering, for sex is dirty if all it means is winning a man, conquering a woman, beating someone out of something, abusing each other's dignity in order to prove that I am a man, I am a woman.

We have such a reluctance to talk about things like

these for fear of being weird. But if we are serious, we shall have to check out everything that is characteristic of the Black Community and examine it for health or disease.

Now it doesn't take any particular expertise to observe that one of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between our men and our women. The mother, daughter, aunt, and grandma tend to line up against the man and his buddies from the pool hall, the bar, or wherever. There is a whole canon of nasty jokes about the enemy camp; a host of phrases we all tend to learn in our grandmothers' kitchens about hardheaded bitches and jive-ass niggers. Mamma tells junior his father was a no-good bum and then proceeds to groom him to be just like his daddy, an abuser of young girls, but faithful of course to Mamma. Mamma tells daughter that men ain't no damn good and raises such suspicions and fears and paranoia in her heart that she is nasty as hell to men she meets and elicits equally lousy behavior. The few semi-permanent relationships that do develop are invariably built on some shaky finance-romance basis, her trying to get into his pockets, him trying to get into her drawers. Our blues singers have chronicled that madness for generations. But only lately has there developed something saner. And it's developed through the Struggle.

We used to think, at least where I grew up, that the pimp and the hustler was a Man—pressed back, fly, easy-spending, exploitive of women, a fancy stud. We also thought of the celebrity and entertainer as a Man—jewelry, frilly shirts, tenor voice, women hanging on his neck and tearing off his clothes, a pretty stud. Then there was the athlete—stupid, brutal, white man's pawn, but graceful and sexy, a muscular stud. But then along came Malcolm and Muhammed Ali and changed all that. And now we tend to think of a Man in terms of his commitment to the Struggle.

We used to think of woman in terms of actresses—pretty, anonymous, whitified, surrounded by glamour. Or in terms of singers—tragic, doomed, mournful, short-lived. But now the young look to and emulate Nina Simone, Abbey Lincoln, Kathleen Cleaver, not because they're gorgeous in that old way, but beautiful in a new Black way. We measure their womanhood in terms of their connection to the Struggle.

Years ago I did a terrible thing. I edited a copy of a young male student's paper, "Reflections on Black

Women," so that all references to male and female were changed to "us" and "them." After several months elapsed, I read the paper during one of our after-class beer chats. And sure enough everyone reacted to phrases like "I don't believe in the double standard, but" or "They're trying to take over" and agreed it was the usual racist shit. As a matter of fact, the author of the original piece was even more vitriolic in his condemnation of the bigotry and hypocrisy than anyone else. Of course, he went into a tirade about my ethics when I announced that the paper, his paper, originally was not about Black and White but about Men and Women. But after the smoke cleared, we all sat and talked for hours, sharing such painfully private experiences, such poignant struggles with the rubber stamp of what a girl's supposed to be like and what a boy's supposed to be like, that attendance in the class dropped off drastically and we found it difficult to face each other for weeks. But at least the point had been made: racism and chauvinism are anti-people. And a man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too.

Several other things came out of that discussion, though, besides the formation of a woman's workshop (which was subsequently wrecked by the presence of the men who could not quite cope with the women's passionate concern with their oppression). One was that most men are just as eager to get off the how-many-babes-I've-laid-this-week treadmill and get down to the business of love, as women are to give up the whatcha-gonna-do-for-me-nigger and be for real. The other had to do with the handling of the woman's liberation question in those organizations established to further the Movement. It would seem that every organization you can name has had to struggle at one time or another with seemingly mutinous cadres of women getting salty about having to man the telephones or fix the coffee while the men wrote the position papers and decided on policy. Some groups condescendingly allotted two or three slots in the executive order to women. Others encouraged the sisters to form a separate caucus and work out something that wouldn't split the organization. Others got nasty and haughty and forced the women to storm out to organize separate workshops. Over the years, things have sort of been cooled out. But I have yet to hear a coolheaded analysis of just what any particular group's stand is on the question. Invariably I hear from some dude that Black women must be supportive and patient so that Black men can regain their man-

hood. The notion of womanhood, they argue—and only if pressed to address themselves to the notion do they think of it or argue—is dependent on his defining his manhood. So the shit goes on. Of course there are any number of women around willing to walk ten paces back to give him the illusion of walking ten paces ahead. I happen to love my ole man, and I would be loathe to patronize him in that way. But perhaps that is because I don't have to, for he is not obsessive about his balls. And I wonder if the dudes who keep hollering about their lost balls realize that they probably surrendered them either to Mr. Charlie in the marketplace, trying to get that Eldorado, or to Miss Anne in bed, trying to bang out some sick notion of love and freedom. It seems to me you find your Self in destroying illusions, smashing myths, laundering the head of whitewash, being responsible to some truth, to the struggle. That entails at the very least cracking through the veneer of this sick society's definition of "masculine" and "feminine."

Frantz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism* devoted much space to the impact the Algerian liberation struggle had on changing traditional relationships and socially defined codes of behavior, releasing people from stultifying role-playing, freeing them to fashion a new sense of self. His chapter on the Algerian family is of particular import, for it clearly demonstrates both the possibility and the necessity for creating new values and new persons. When the son, for example, took a revolutionary position, he could no longer abide by the customary regulation to regard his father's word as law. He did not reject his father, he converted him. And the father, to reestablish a sense of sovereignty, joined his son and invoked the authority of the mquis or cell leader. The daughter, heretofore relegated to a mute existence as a minor in her father's household or a minor in her husband's household, found through involvement with the struggle a new discipline, a world of responsibility. She was no longer simply an item in a marriage contract or business deal but a revolutionary committed to action. And she tended to see men in a new light: not as benevolent protectors or tyrants, but in terms of their preparedness to join the FLN. The mother, to protect her family, had to get involved too, often carrying messages or inventing alibis or following her man to the mountains with bandages and food. She found a new sense of mobility and dignity through responsibility. Marriages were no longer contract arrangements but freely chosen unions of

individuals bound to a corporate future of freedom. The "family" was no longer a socially ordained nuclear unit to perpetuate the species or legitimize sexuality, but an extended kinship of cellmates and neighbors linked in the business of actualizing a vision of a liberated society. A new person is born when he finds a value to define an actional self and when he can assume autonomy for that self. Such is the task that faces us.

Revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard the next larger unit—the couple or pair, that jeopardize the still larger unit—the family or cell, that put the entire movement in peril. We make many false starts because we have been programmed to depend on white models or white interpretations of non-white models, so we don't even ask the correct questions, much less begin to move in a correct direction. Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch. Doctrinaire Marxism is basically incompatible with Black nationalism; New Left politics is incompatible with Black nationalism; doctrinaire socialism is incompatible with Black revolution; capitalism, lord knows, is out. We need to reject too the opinions of outside "experts" who love to explain ourselves to ourselves, telling the Black man that the matriarch is his enemy, telling Black women through the mushrooming of b.c. clinics that too many children is the Black family's enemy. So he indulges in lost-balls fantasies and attempts to exact recompense by jumping feet foremost into her chest, and she starts conjuring up abandonment stories and ADC nightmares and leaps at his throat. Now what is that but acting like we were just symbolic personae in some historical melodrama. Keep the big guns on the real enemy. Men have got to develop some heart and some sound analysis to realize that when sisters get passionate about themselves and their direction, it does not mean they're readying up to kick men's ass. They're readying up for honesty. And women have got to develop some heart and some sound analysis so they can resist the temptation of buying peace with their man with self-sacrifice and posturing. The job then regarding "roles" is to submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood (or reject them out of hand if you're not squeamish about being called "neuter") until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to Blackhood.

It may be lonely. Certainly painful. It'll take time. We've got time. That of course is an unpopular utterance these days. Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We'd better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. Mouth don't win the war. It don't even win the people. Neither does haste, urgency, and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement. Running off to mimeograph a fuck-whitey leaflet, leaving your mate to brood, is not revolutionary. Hopping a plane to rap to someone else's "community" while your son struggles alone with the Junior Scholastic assignment on "The Dark Continent" is not revolutionary. Sitting around murder-mouthing incorrect niggers while your father goes upside your mother's head is not revolutionary. Mapping out a building takeover when your term paper is overdue and your scholarship is under review is not revolutionary. Talking about moving against the Mafia while your nephew takes off old ladies at the subway stop is not revolutionary. If your house ain't in order, you ain't in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain't out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings with your mate is shit. Ain't no such animal as an instant guerrilla.