

Exposure: Houston
Aftermath Project
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“Black women are the mules of the earth.” – Sojourner Truth

“People say Black women are the backbone of this community, but in reality, there aren’t any Black women running anything here. There aren’t any Black women running the churches, or the community centers or the schools,” Assata Richards, director of the Young Mothers Program at Project Row Houses, said, her voice edged with defiance. She paused, softening, “We get all of the work and all of the responsibility without any of the respect or power.”

That fact would not be an issue if hard work paid off equally for all members of our society. If only pulling yourself up by the bootstraps meant that everyone could walk in suede shoes. But for single Black mothers raising children in a society that continues to view single-parent homes as the emblem of family dysfunction, big strides aren’t always recognized as steps forward.

The historical transformation of patriarchal African communities to matriarchal African-American communities was born out of slavery. Female slaves were forced to watch their male counterparts beaten within inches of their lives, were subject to rape by their masters, and left to raise their children under a system that pitted slaves against each other.

“If you break the female mother, she will break the offspring in its early years of development and when the offspring is old enough to work, she will deliver it up to you, for her normal female protective tendencies will have been lost in the original breaking process.” Willie Lynch’s infamous letter spoke coldly of perpetuating a system that destroyed the image of the Black male and left the Black female isolated in her independence. And while legal slavery ended, the mentality that bred slaves did not.

Ingrained in the psyche of Black men and women, institutional racism through Jim Crow until today continues to reinforce this ideology. Couple institutional policies with White fear surrounding Black men. Even today with an African-American president, Black men continue to be depicted as criminals. That is, no doubt, a legacy of late 1980’s and early 1990’s when crack cocaine decimated Black neighborhoods and gang violence was at its height. Black-on-Black violence left one in four Black men in the grave and drug laws continue to leave one in ten adult Black males in prison. It is no surprise that most of academic literature is focused on the question: where is the Black man?

This question, however, was not the right question as far as the women I interviewed were concerned. They’re tired, they told me, of that question being asked. Tired of the focus being on what is missing, on what is deficient, on what is broken. Where is the Black man? “Who cares?” Mary Estes asked me.

Tupac Shakur wrote a letter to his mama. He sang, *And I could see you comin’ home after work late/ You’re in the kitchen tryin’ to fix us a hot plate/ Ya just workin’ with the scraps you was given/ And mama made miracles every Thanksgiving/ But now the road got rough, you’re alone/ You’re trying to raise two bad kids on your own.*

Under slavery, Black women’s independence was formed. Jim Crow laws, institutional racism, and the legacy of violence within Black communities have

contributed to reinforcing her isolation. But today, it is a cause for celebration, that despite a deck stacked against her, she proves that she will not be moved, putting food on the table, clothes on the back, and a light on at home.

Peregrine Chapman, a young mother I interviewed, told me, “Especially with having a Black male child, I have to show him what a Supreme Female looks like. I need to be an example for what he should look for in his own life, and I need to show him what perseverance looks like.” As gender gaps close, Black women’s independence becomes less isolating. Instead, it is a platform for personal achievement, with more Black women attending college, with or without children, and more Black women gaining ground in the workforce.

In many ways, Black women are still the mules of the earth. We’ve saddled her with blame for the plight of our inner cities, stacked on her the weight of winning bread, and packed the burden of childrearing onto her strong shoulders. And like the mule, she stubbornly refuses to bow under her loaded yoke. She is not moved.