

do not fit their identity neatly into the traditional African-American category.

Black people from the West Indies have a long history of immigration to the United States, but their numbers have increased dramatically since the 1960s. During the entire decade of the 1950s, only 123,000 Caribbean people immigrated, but during the 1990s nearly one million did so. The Caribbean islands were one of the main areas of importation for African slaves. The islands' sugar production served as the economic engine of the Spanish, French, Dutch, and British New World empires well into the nineteenth century. These empires all abandoned slavery by the late 1800s, and the retreat of colonialism from the Caribbean in the twentieth century has left a number of micro-nations largely populated by people of African descent whose cultures have remained more influenced by Africa than was true of the United States. Hence African cultural practices were fused with those of the British in Jamaica, the French in Haiti, and the Spanish in Santo Domingo and Cuba. Although a racial hierarchy is not unknown in these societies, racial identity is less important than class and merit-based achievement. Upon immigration, mostly to New York, Florida, and other parts of the East Coast, immigrants from the Caribbean soon learn the importance of race in the United States, but they have also carved out a separate identity from other African Americans. First-generation West Indians tend to have more economic success than native African Americans, in part because employers often favor them. The second generation has often had a more difficult time as the effects of racial discrimination and poor schools take their toll.

Voluntary immigrants from Africa once were few, and before 1980 they were mainly European colonials or from North African nations such as Egypt. In the 1950s only 14,000 Africans came over, but during the 1990s over 350,000 arrived. Most of these new immigrants are men, and they tend to be among the most highly educated of all immigrants. Part of their reason for coming to the United States was the destabilization of many African nations and the persecution of autocratic regimes.

### BLACK FEMINISM

The feminist and gay rights movements have challenged traditional ideas of racial identity in recent decades. Both arose as part of the broader "rights revolution" that began with the civil rights movement, but each highlights a different aspect of an individual's identity—gender or sexuality—in addition to race.

A new wave of feminism emerged on the American political landscape in the 1960s and 1970s and transformed gender relations. This movement arose, in part, out of the successes of the African-American civil rights struggle. The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed sexual as well as racial discrimination in employment. Although this had not been a goal of the civil rights movement at that time, and its inclusion was meant in part to lessen the law's chance of passage, it helped open discussions of gender oppression that had laid dormant for decades. Many white women activists in the SNCC and other civil rights groups assumed leading roles in the emerging feminist movement, often using the same strategies and tactics that had worked in the fight against racism.

Second-wave feminism achieved many important changes as it gathered adherents in the 1960s and 1970s. The National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, spearheaded efforts to end job discrimination against women, to expand access to safe and effective birth control, to legalize abortion, and to secure federal and state support for child care. One of the movement's most important early successes was Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, which required colleges and universities to ensure equal access for women. Another was the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion. Beyond these legislative and judicial victories, the feminist movement has opened up choices for women in nearly every aspect of their lives that traditional gender roles had precluded. It has also engendered a backlash as conservative men and women organized to fight against passage of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, access to abortion, sex education in schools, and a variety of related issues. This fight has driven much of the political conflict in the United States since the 1970s.

Black women were involved from the start in shaping modern feminism. The core of black feminist thinking is a dual critique of the women's and black liberation movements' core ideology. Black women scholars and writers argued that a critique of patriarchy was incomplete without attention to race and class. Whereas white leaders of the women's movement were silent on race, many male leaders in the African-American freedom movement were all too forthright about their views on gender. As Black Panther leader Elaine Brown put it, "A woman in the Black Power movement was considered at best irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah." Many believed racial oppression was the primary evil to be fought and that feminism was either a distraction or,



## E. LYNN HARRIS

*E. Lynn Harris was born in Flint, Michigan, and grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. He is a best-selling writer whose novels have explored what it is like to be gay and black in America. His first novel, Invisible Life, was published in 1991. In the following account about his own childhood, Harris is eight years old when he learns a painful lesson about perceptions of sexual difference.*

Easter Sunday, 1964, finally arrived. After my bath, I raced into the tiny room I shared with my two younger sisters and saw the coat laid out on my twin bed. It was red, black, and green plaid with gold buttons. Daddy and I had picked the coat out together at Dundee's Men's Store. I quickly put on my new clothes, and I could see my sisters, Anita and Zettoria, who were five and three, slip on new dresses over their freshly pressed hair. Anita had on a blue taffeta dress, and Shane (our nickname for Zettoria, since her name was so hard to pronounce) had on an identical one in pink. Their dresses were pretty but didn't compare to my coat. After Anita and Shane had accepted their compliments from Daddy, he called me in for inspection. "Where is my little man? Come out here and let Daddy see that new coat," he said. I quickly buttoned up each of the three gold buttons and dashed to the living room for Daddy's endorsement of my outfit. "Look, Daddy. Look at me," I said with excitement as I twirled around like my sisters had a moment before. Suddenly Daddy's bright smile turned into a disgusted frown. What was wrong? Didn't he like my new coat? Had Easter been canceled? "Come here. Stop that damn twirling around," Daddy yelled. I stopped and moved toward Daddy. He was seated on the armless aqua vinyl sofa. Before I reached him, he grabbed me and shouted. "Look at you. You. . . little sissy with this coat all buttoned up like a little girl. Don't you know better? Men don't button up their coats all the way." Before I could respond or clearly realize what I had done wrong, I saw Daddy's powerful hands moving toward me. His grip was so quick and powerful that I felt the back of my prized coat come apart. A panic filled my tiny body when I saw his hand clutching the fabric. I began to cry as my sisters looked on in horror. I could hear Mama's high heels clicking swiftly as she raced to the living room from the kitchen. "If you don't stop that damn crying, I'm going to make you wear one of your sister's dresses to church." I caught myself and stopped crying. Daddy meant what he said. I would be the laughing stock of the entire neighborhood. . . . I could see all

by encouraging women to be strong and self-reliant, actually undermined the efforts of black men to overcome the emasculating effects of white male power. Black feminists such as Frances Beale countered that racism and sexism had oppressed black women. "It is true," she wrote in 1970, "that our husbands, fathers, brothers and sons have been emasculated, lynched, and brutalized. They have suffered from the cruelest assault on mankind that the world has ever known. However, it is a gross distortion of fact that black women have oppressed black men."

Responding to sexism in the black power movement, many black women writers and activists sought to make the struggle against it as important as that against racism. Between 1973 and 1975, the National Black Feminist Organization (NFBO) articulated many of the concerns specific to black women, from anger with black men for dating and marrying white women; to internal conflict over skin color, hair texture, and facial features; to sexual violence and harassment against black women; to differences in the economic mobility of white and black women. Black feminists also attacked the myth of black matriarchy and stereotypical portrayals of black women in popular culture. Although the organization was short lived, it did break the silence imposed on black women by black liberation movements. Black feminists also helped others talk openly about domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment in employment. Their political message is best summed up by UCLA law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw: "When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism, and when antiracism does

my friends pointing and laughing at me. I don't remember what I wore that Easter Sunday or many Easters that followed. All I recall is that I wasn't wearing a dress, and I remember what my daddy had said to me. I didn't know what a sissy was and why Daddy despised them so. All I knew was that I was determined never to be one.

*What does this episode reveal about Harris's father's concept of masculinity and manhood?*

*Why is this particular Easter Sunday so important to Harris's self-development and sexual identity?*

*How are Harris's sisters treated differently from him?*

E. Lynn Harris, *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted?* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

not incorporate opposition to patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose."

#### GAY AND LESBIAN AFRICAN AMERICANS

The success of the civil rights movement encouraged gays and lesbians to fight openly against the discrimination they had faced for centuries. Their movement was small and quiet until 1969, when gay men at the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village violently resisted a police raid. The multiracial crowd's refusal at this bar to go on submitting to the kind of police harassment that homosexuals had long been subjected to in the United States sparked an explosion of activism. By the end of the 1970s, many states and cities had decriminalized homosexual behavior and lifted employment policies that discriminated on the basis of sexuality. Although tensions arose between the lesbian and gay wings of the movement, they worked together to pursue the full range of civil rights enjoyed by heterosexuals despite a persistent and powerful opposition from conservative groups.

Gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender African Americans have struggled against their marginality within the larger gay rights movement and homophobia in their own communities. Like the women's movement, the early gay and lesbian rights movement tended to be predominantly white and middle class. Although not explicitly racist, it tended to see racial issues as secondary to or separate from the goal of ending discrimination based on sexual preference.

Despite hostility toward the gay and lesbian rights movement by some African Americans, many black leaders, such as Jesse Jackson, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and John Lewis, and civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, have embraced its agenda. They do so in part because they accept the analogy between the struggle against repression based on sexual preference and that based on race. The debate between black feminists and gay rights activists, who argue that gender and class identities must be taken into account in political and scholarly analysis, and nationalists, who focus on black identity as primary, continues to rage and will influence our understanding of African-American life in the twenty-first century. As Coretta Scott King put it in a 2002 speech to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "I believe very strongly that all forms of bigotry and discrimination are equally wrong and should be opposed by right-thinking Americans everywhere. Freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation is surely a fundamental human right in any great



**Coretta King at the National Gay/Lesbian Task Force in 2002.** Coretta Scott King lived the life of a committed, deeply engaged social reform activist. From 1968 to 1995 she headed the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. She uses her voice to shape opinion and raise awareness about the injustices that black people, women and children, the poor and homeless, and gays and lesbians confront in their daily lives.

democracy, as much as freedom from racial, religious, gender, or ethnic discrimination." ←

#### CONCLUSION

The closing of the twentieth century saw remarkable progress for African Americans even as part of the community remained mired in poverty and suffering. African Americans still experience the burden of racism that was so familiar to W. E. B. Du Bois, which prompts collective political action and the maintenance of predominantly black churches, colleges, and social action groups. The black soul that he thought had so much to give America now flows freely through its art, language, and popular culture, especially in hip-hop. At the same time, increasing diversity in the ways that African Americans live their lives has led to differences in how individuals understand their identities. Some, like Anthony Appiah, long for the possibility of asserting those identities in ways not limited by race. The tension between racial, class, gender, sexual, and other identities will shape the African-American odyssey as it moves through the twenty-first century.