This essay explores “othering” processes revealed in discourses about women, work, and leadership. Fifteen years ago, when I began to study women in management, I encountered a broad literature on gender and leadership that, among other things, advanced a “distinctly feminine” approach to leadership.1 The feminine model was intended as a counternarrative to the dominant masculine approaches that stifle women’s values. However, models of feminine and masculine leadership were based on the socially constructed identities and cultural values of Western, white, middle-class women and men, but presented as race-neutral, universal depictions of how the leadership process is accomplished. Broadly defined, leadership is a process of influence between leaders and followers in the pursuit of goals. Theories of leadership attempt to explain how that process unfolds to yield the most effective outcomes. But the meanings of “organizational leader” also take on high symbolic importance in Western culture.2 Organizational members come to expect leaders to look, act, and think in ways that are consistent with certain iconic images.

In mainstream academic journals and popular press there are two distinct images of leaders, “The Great White Masculine Man” and The Ideal Feminine Woman.”3 An understanding of the leadership process flows from these symbolic representations. “Feminine”
leadership is characterized as a noncontrolling, nurturing, emotional, and relationship-oriented process, which is in stark contrast to “masculine” leadership viewed as a controlling, aggressive, rational, and distant process. There is a debate in the literature that centers on which model is better, with one popular book announcing that there is a distinct “female advantage.” Excluded from these dominant Western visions of leadership are the experiences of other groups and cultural traditions that view the very notions of “feminine” and “masculine” differently and that should be influencing the production of leadership knowledge. In the dominant popular discourses on gender and leadership of the 1980s and early 1990s, there was not a great deal of interest in the question “What can be learned about leadership from Black women, Asian women, Latina women, poor women, and other marginalized groups?” At the same time, critiques by black feminist writers in women’s studies, communication, management, sociology, and psychology boldly called for a revisioning of the white-washed theories about women in society. So I set out to study organizational leadership from black women’s standpoints.

I wondered how we might redefine the notions of feminine and masculine leadership if we took into account black women’s cultural history of resistance and empowerment. What would processes of control and noncontrol look like if we dislodged them from the context of white privilege and reexamined them from the standpoints of resistance to oppression? I explored these questions through research on the history of black women’s work and community activism. I also conducted interviews and observations of African American women senior executives who came of age during the civil rights movement. And I recently began a project with African American teen girls in low-income urban neighborhoods. In my research, I found evidence of a tradition of African American women’s leadership that disrupts traditional notions of “feminine” and “masculine” leadership. It is a tradition that I argue can be traced to creative resistance and community building during the era of slavery and is visible in contemporary culture. In this chapter, I share some of what I have learned about leadership from African American women’s standpoints.

I recognize that tradition is a complicated and often politically charged concept with multiple meanings. It is sometimes used as shorthand in our institutions to maintain or reclaim race, gender, or sexual oppression and domination. It also can be highly oppressive as members of a community rigidly adhere to rules out of fear of cult leaders. However, I am using the concept of tradition to emphasize