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A Rainbow in the Clouds: Planting Spiritual Reconciliation in Mama's Southern Garden

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AFRICANA WOMEN'S
STUDIES AND HISTORY

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B.A. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA, 2014

A RAINBOW IN THE CLOUDS: PLANTING SPIRITUAL RECONCILIATION IN
MAMA'S SOUTHERN GARDEN

Committee Chair: Stephanie Evans, Ph.D.

Thesis dated: December 2016

Through a content analysis of the maternal relationships in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, the author evaluates how southern black women writers construct black motherhood. This study is based on the premise that Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood confine black mothers to controlling images that continue to criminalize, distort, and devalue black motherhood. The researcher finds that the institution of black motherhood exists independently of Eurocentric paradigms. The conclusions drawn from these findings suggest that black women writers construct motherhood in terms of Womanist leadership. In the aforementioned memoirs, Womanist leadership is learned and defined in the black church. In summation, this thesis finds that southern black women writers use spiritual reconciliation as a form of Womanist leadership.

A RAINBOW IN THE CLOUDS: PLANTING SPIRITUAL RECONCILIATION IN
MAMA'S SOUTHERN GARDEN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

CHYNA HILL

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AFRICANA WOMEN'S
STUDIES AND HISTORY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

DECEMBER 2016

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For Mama Afeni, who by writing her truths, encouraged me to write my own.

Dear Mama,
You are revolutionary.
A Revolutionary black Woman.
A Revolutionary black Panther.
A Revolutionary black Mother.
Consequently,
You birthed a Revolutionary--
Who even in death...births revolutionaries...over and over again
You were the Vessel.
You were the Midwife.
You are Afeni.
Thank you for life.
You mothered us all.

First and foremost, black women saved my life. This thesis would not have been possible without the leadership of Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans and Dr. Stephanie Y. Sears. I am grateful for their dedication, commitment, and relentless conviction that this work is significant. I am equally grateful to my mother, Stephanie Davis, her partner, Tish Johnson, and my great grandmother, Victoria Davis, who continue to demonstrate that love hurts and heals. I adore you. Everything I am and everything I hope to be is owed to a long line of black mothers who loved me through the midnight hours. One king and five generations of southern black women, lived, thrived, and died in the South. In the context of their lives, they did the best they could. Not only have I found their gardens, I have found what they planted there. I am the product of artists. Here is their life's work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, establishes black women's voices as necessary and vital parts of the black community. Cooper writes, "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole...race enters with me."¹ Cooper's assertion that only the black woman can say "when and where I enter" contends that racial progression is impossible without the contributions of black women.² To proclaim "when and where I enter" is to designate black women as a vital part of the whole. Recognizing that southern black women have experienced a unique convergence of racism, sexism, and classism; Cooper argues that the voices of southern black women offer distinct perceptions of black women's experiences.

Shirley Turner and James Stewart's "Gendering Africana Studies: Insights from Anna Julia Cooper," asserts "Cooper establishes her personal experience and the personal

¹ "Anna Julia Cooper Biography," Anna Julia Cooper Center, accessed September 13, 2016, <http://ajccenter.wfu.edu/about-anna-julia-cooper/>.

² Ibid.

experiences of other Black women as both valid and necessary sources for the construction of social theory and as the basis for social and political action.”³ In this work, the personal experiences of southern black women writers serve as valid and necessary sources in establishing black motherhood as independent entity. Consequently, “the voice of the Black woman is not only valid alongside other forms of knowledge, but is necessary, if a “fair trial” is to be had.”⁴ Undoubtedly, the lived experiences of southern black women writers significantly shape what they write and how they write. Stephanie Evans asserts, “Black women’s positions are indeed “particular” and so these stories enrich the “treasure house of thought.”⁵ Southern black women writers are not a monolithic entity and factors such as demographics, geographical location, socioeconomics, marital status, and education significantly influence how black women see and experience the world.

This author contends that Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood do not produce positive images of black mothers. In “Black Mothers Are the Worst,” Anthonia Akitunde discusses Google phrases that populate when users enter the phrase, “Black mothers are...” To date, Google results complete the aforementioned sentence, “abusive, mean, the worst, and single.” Akitunde’s article speaks to the depictions of black mothers in the media which consistently and disproportionately produce negative images and

³ James Stewart and Shirley Moody Turner, “Gendering Africana Studies: Insights from Anna Julia Cooper,” *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵ Stephanie Evans, “African American Women Scholars and International Research: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper’s Legacy of Study Abroad,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 18 (Fall 2009): 94.

stereotypes of black mothers. According to Patricia Hill Collins, when black women adhere to these Eurocentric standards of motherhood, they risk lower self-esteem related to internalized oppression which, when transmitted inter-generationally, can control black communities.⁶

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which southern black women writers construct black motherhood. By conducting a content analysis of the maternal relationships in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author evaluates how southern black women writers construct black motherhood. In examining constructions of black motherhood, the author examines the social, political, and personal contexts in which the aforementioned texts are written. For the purpose of this study, relational analysis, a method of content analysis, is used to examine the relationships between Collins's pre-identified themes of black motherhood and the themes conveyed by southern black women writers. Although there are numerous southern black women writers who have made significant efforts to produce positive constructions of black motherhood, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker have produced the most expansive volumes of work. Authoring over seventy works collectively, Angelou and Walker establish black mothers as midwives who birth and rebirth generations of black women.

Marguerite Annie Johnson, later known as, Maya Angelou, was born April 4, 1928 to Bailey and Vivian Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. At age three, Maya is sent to

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, ed., "The Dominant Perspective: Eurocentric Views of White Motherhood," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender*, ed. Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 326.

live with her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas. Contrary to the harsh economy of the 1930's, Maya's grandmother owns a general store and is able to provide for Maya and her brother. During a visit at Vivian Baxter's, Maya's birth mother, Angelou is raped by Mr. Freeman, Vivian's boyfriend. Following his release from jail, Mr. Freeman is murdered and Angelou quits speaking for five years. At age sixteen, Angelou becomes pregnant with her son, Guy. As a single mother, Angelou works two jobs in an attempt to support her son. Prior to becoming a writer, Angelou tours the world as an actress, dancer, and singer. Angelou's first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is published in 1969.

Born on February 9th, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia to sharecroppers, Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant, Alice Walker is the youngest of eight children. Living in the segregated South and governed by Jim Crow laws, Walker grows up in extreme poverty. At age eight, Walker is accidentally shot in the eye with a BB Gun by her younger brother. Unfortunately, Walker's family could not afford immediate medical attention and Walker lost sight in her right eye. Refusing to deny Walker education, Walker's mother works additional jobs to ensure that Walker has the opportunity to attend school. After graduating college, Walker marries Melvyn Roseman Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer and relocated to Jackson, Mississippi. Although Walker's writing career starts when she is a senior at Sarah Lawrence, Walker's *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* is not released until 1983. At the time of its publication, Walker is thirty-nine years old and has survived an abortion, overcome depression, birthed a daughter, and endured a divorce. Featuring a collection of book reviews, speeches,

articles, and essays composed from 1965 to 1983, Walker's *In Search of my Mothers' Gardens* functions as a memoir.

Contrary to black women writers from other regions of the United States, Angelou and Walker specifically construct black motherhood in the context of their southern heritage. By distinguishing certain features of the South, Angelou and Walker separate black motherhood from other regions of the United States. The South's geography determines the work that Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant are able to obtain. Even after the Civil War, the South's economy remains dependent on agriculture. As share croppers and domestic workers, Ms. Henderson and Mrs. Grant work long hours, perform hard labor, and earn meager salaries. Despite minimal resources, both Ms. Henderson and Mrs. Grant teach their daughters how to raise and sustain a family in the segregated South. In "Reclaiming Southern Roots," Angelou discusses memories of "cruel and bitter hate," that was met with "generous and luscious love," in her southern upbringing. In these experiences, Angelou alludes to a southern heritage of community that functions like a magnet.⁷ Angelou writes,

They return to the South to find or make places for themselves in the land of their fore parents. They make friends under the shade of trees their ancestors left decades earlier. Many find themselves happy, without being able to explain the emotion. I think it is simply that they feel generally important...no one can claim that the South is petty or

⁷ Maya Angelou, "Reclaiming Southern Roots," in *Letter to My Daughter*, Trade ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 131.

indifferent. Even in little Stamps, Arkansas, Black people walk with an air which implies, when I walk in, they may like me or dislike me, but everybody know I'm here.⁸

Per Angelou's depiction, the mere geography of the South shapes the attitudes and behaviors of the people who live there. Angelou's "Reclaiming Southern Roots," further speaks to the unique vocation of southern black women writers. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker examine their maternal relationships in regard to race, sex, class, and gender. Collectively, these intersections define and shape how Walker and Angelou construct black motherhood.

Background

According to Collins, "The cult of true womanhood, with its emphasis on motherhood as woman's highest calling, has long held a special place in the gender symbolism of white Americans. From this perspective, women's activities are confined to the care of children, the nurturing of a husband, and maintenance of the household."⁹ Contrary to the aforementioned dominant perspective of motherhood, many black mothers do not have the luxury of a nuclear family, strict sex role segregation, and motherhood as an independent occupation. Acknowledging this, Dorothy Roberts writes, "The devaluation of Black motherhood is a way of disregarding the Black humanity.

⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, ed., "The Dominant Perspective: Eurocentric Views of White Motherhood," in *Toward a New Psychology of Gender*, ed. Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 326.

Discouraging Black procreation is a means of subordinating the entire race; under patriarchy, it is accomplished through the regulation of Black women's fertility."¹⁰ As black women's experiences with motherhood differ from those of the dominant group, white America attempts to punish black mothers for failing to uphold these values. Historically, the terms "Aunt Jemima" and "Mammy" have been used to capture the essence of black women's roles.¹¹ Whether black mothers skew or adhere to the Eurocentric perspective addressed by Collins, Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood produce and perpetuate negative images of black mothers.

For black women, the Mammy trope is not only expected, it is demanded. By adhering to this stereotype, black women are denied agency over their lives and the lives they bear. A surface examination of the Mammy stereotype suggests that black women who assumed the Mammy role during enslavement had more power than other enslaved women. However, Mammies were just as likely to be sexually abused, exploited, and dehumanized. Roberts writes, "Mammy was both the perfect mother and the perfect slave; whites saw her as a "passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them."¹² When black women are placed in the Mammy stereotype, black women are expected to sacrifice all. By embracing the Mammy stereotype, black mothers are participatory in systemic oppression.

¹⁰Dorothy E. Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood" (1993). Faculty Scholarship. Paper 595. http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/595.

¹¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

Expanding on Roberts' definition, Deborah Gray White adds, "Mammy was a woman who could do anything, and do it better than anyone else. Because of her expertise in all domestic matters, she was the premier house servant and all others were her subordinates."¹³ In *Incidents of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs recalls:

My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's word: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye evenso unto them. But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong...She possessed but few slaves; and at her death those were all distributed among her relatives. Five of them were my grandmother's children, and had shared the same milk that nourished her mother's children.¹⁴

As Jacobs elucidates, Americans have thoroughly embraced the idea of black mothers dressed in aprons, hair wraps, and working in a white family's kitchen.¹⁵ Even so, Roberts writes, "It is important to recognize, however, that Mammy did not reflect in virtue of Black motherhood. The ideology of Mammy placed no value on Black women as the mothers of their children. Rather, whites claimed Mammy's total devotion to the master's children, without regard to the fate of Mammy's own offspring."¹⁶ The Aunt Jemima and Mammy stereotype is representative of the role that white America has assigned to black mothers. This is not reflective of the roles that black mothers play in the lives of their children. Patricia Hill Collins asserts, "Controlling images like the Mammy

¹³ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't i a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 47

¹⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Dover Thrift Editions)*, Reprint ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 8.

¹⁵ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

aim to influence Black maternal behavior.”¹⁷ The image of the Mammy attempts to keep black mothers confined to a specific place in white power structures.¹⁸ One of the best examples of this is Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*. In *Imitation of Life*, Lora Meredith employs Annie Johnson as a live in nanny. Annie Johnson, a widow and single mother, is incredibly grateful. However, throughout the film, Ms. Johnson is expected to adhere and perform to the roles of the Mammy stereotype. As Lora climbs her way to fame, Ms. Johnson becomes solely responsible for childcare and domestic duties. Despite having her own child, Ms. Johnson's first priority is Lora's daughter. For her role as Annie Johnson, Juanita Moore is nominated for an Academy Award.

In addition to the term “Mammy,” black mothers have also been labeled as Jezebels. White writes, “Jezebel was the counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudery, indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh.”¹⁹ The hyper sexuality of the Jezebel image allowed for the sexual and reproductive exploitation of black women. According to White, “Unaccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook semi nudity for lewdness. Similarly, they misinterpreted African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to Africans’ uncontrolled lust, tribal dances were reduced to the level of orgy, and

¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 73.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't i a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 29.

African religions lost the sacredness that had sustained generations of ancestral worshippers.”²⁰ Consequently, black women were labeled as sensual beings and forced into chattel slavery. During slave auctions, the bodies of black women were displayed and examined on auction blocks to determine their capacity to bear children. Roberts asserts, “This construct of the licentious temptress served to justify white men’s sexual abuse of Black women. The stereotype of Black women as sexually promiscuous also defined them as bad mothers.”²¹ The Jezebel image also contributed to the creation of the “Fancy Trade.” White describes the “Fancy Trade,” as the sale of light-skinned black women for the exclusive purpose of prostitution and concubinage.²² According to Adrienne Davis, at a time when prime fields hands sold for \$1,600, a fancy girl brought \$5,000.²³ Davis continues, “At this juncture, sexual abuse and economic profits brutally collided.”²⁴ Fancy Girls and Jezebels often served as mistresses to their masters. Many of these women bore his children.

According to Dorothy Roberts, “The myths about immoral, neglectful, and domineering black mothers have been supplemented by the contemporary image of the welfare queen--the lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 11.

²² Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't i a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 37.

²³ Adrienne Davis, ed., “Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo Principle,” in *Words of Fire: an Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 228.

²⁴ Ibid., 229.

the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check.”²⁵ In 1976, Reagan perpetrated this typology when he suggested that black mothers are welfare queens. Reagan proclaimed, “She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards...She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax free cash income alone is over \$150,000.”²⁶ Although Reagan did not explicitly identify his “welfare queen” as a black woman, his exaggerated story spoke to the preconceived notion of black motherhood that many white American’s already had. Reagan's Welfare Queen of the 1970's depicts black mothers as single, lazy, and unemployed. Consequently, this archetype has followed black mothers since.

In addition to welfare queens and Mammys, black mothers have also been associated with the term baby mama. The term “baby mama” often refers to single black mothers whose children are born out of wedlock. In “Confessions of a Single Black Mother,” black mothers discuss the “baby mama” stereotype, their personal experiences with single motherhood, and what it means to raise a black child. For these women, black motherhood means working multiple jobs, surviving systems of oppression, and dealing with the psychological warfare of raising sons and daughters in white America. These interviews highlight the enormity of the sacrifices that black mothers make to ensure the survival of their families. A central idea in Clenora Hudson Weems’s *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, is the centrality of motherhood to the Africana

²⁵ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 17.

²⁶ John Blake, “Return of the 'welfare Queen',” CNN, January 23, 2012, accessed May 8, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/23/politics/welfare-queen/>.

woman. The women in these interviews reinforce this idea by acknowledging that the best thing they have done or ever will do is mother their black children. These interviews are significant because they demonstrate that the term “baby mama” does not offer an accurate depiction of black motherhood. As seen in these interviews, black mothers are teachers, caregivers, counselors, employees, students, and whoever they are asked to be.

Scope

Presently, the U.S. Census Bureau contends that the South houses the largest population of African Americans in the United States. Hence, the largest populations of black women are in Florida, Georgia, and Texas. The U.S. Census Bureau divides the South into the three regions.²⁷ These include the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central. The South is comprised of Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.²⁸ Among single mother households in the South, nearly half of families headed by black women are poor.

Additionally, in states which have rejected Medicaid expansion (NC, SC, GA, AL, MS, LA), black women are less likely to be insured and have access to the worst health insurance coverage in America. Georgia and Arkansas serve as nests for Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. In the 2015 Black Women in the United States report,

²⁷ “Census Regions and Divisions of the United States,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed December 8, 2015, http://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf.

²⁸ Ibid.

21.8% of black women are uninsured in Georgia and 19.1% of black women are uninsured in Arkansas.²⁹ In the Angelou and Walker household, poverty influences how both authors construct southern black motherhood. In both *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the absence of health insurance causes both mothers to adapt and overcome medical challenges. When Maya Angelou acquires a toothache that causes excruciating pain, Ms. Henderson takes Angelou to a white dentist in town. When he refuses to treat Angelou, Ms. Henderson insists that the dentist owes her interest on a loan. Without this compensation, Ms. Henderson would not be able to get Angelou to a dentist or back home. After Ms. Henderson collects her debt, Ms. Henderson travels to the next town over and ensures that Angelou is treated. Similar to Angelou who did not have health insurance, Walker's family does not either. At eight years old, Walker is shot in the right eye with a BB pellet. Without a car, the Walker family is unable to seek immediate medical attention. Consequently, scar tissue begins to form and Walker is declared permanently blind in one eye. Even so, both Ms. Henderson and Mrs. Grant use the minimal resources available to ensure the survival and progression of their children.

Maya Angelou and Alice Walker use retrospection to examine the constructions of black motherhood under systemic oppression. In this context, retrospection refers to Angelou and Walker's childhood reflections. Contrary to the Eurocentric views of motherhood that limit white women to child care and domestic duties, black women do

²⁹ Avis Jones-Deweever. *Black Women and Health: Black Women in the United States 2015*. Washington: The National Coalition on Black Civics, 2015. Accessed November 11, 2015. <http://nxinnovations.co/100bw/wp-content/pdf/BlackWomeninUS2015.pdf>

not and have not had the luxury of an economic independence that is conducive to motherhood as an independent occupation. Recognizing the aforementioned, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women do not fit in Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood and therefore, have to shift from traditional definitions of motherhood. Collins writes, “Even though selected groups of white women are challenging the cult of true womanhood and its accompanying definition of motherhood, the dominant ideology remains powerful. As long as these approaches remain prominent in scholarly and popular discourse, Eurocentric views of white motherhood will continue to affect Black women's lives.”³⁰ The voices of black women writers offer a corrective lens to the distortions associated with black motherhood. Therefore, it is crucial to include the voices of southern black women writers in constructions of motherhood.

Significance

The contributions of southern black women writers are monumental to black women’s literary traditions. Historically and contemporarily, southern black women writers have advanced our understandings of blackness, motherhood, and identity. However, it is only in the last century that the voices of southern black women writers have infiltrated black literature. As their voices have been largely silenced and ignored, the voices of southern black women writers are not only critical to advancing understandings of black motherhood, they are imperative. Additionally, the south is

³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships,” *SAGE* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 3, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/openview/c5d904be524038d21ec38135cea7b5fe/1?pq-origsite=gscholar>.

where the masses are. Recognizing this, Cooper declares, “I speak for the colored women of the South, because it is there that the millions of Blacks in this country have watered the soil with blood and tears, and it is there too that the colored woman of America has made her characteristic history, and there her destiny is evolving.”³¹ Contrary to the South, in 1804, many Northern states abolished the institution of slavery within their borders. Although emancipation was not immediate, many African Americans were able to start their lives decades before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the civil war. As a result, northern black women were able to pursue literacy opportunities earlier than their sisters in the South. Cooper writes,

Since emancipation the movement has been at times confused and stormy, so that we could not always tell whether we were going forward or groping in a circle. We hardly knew what we ought to emphasize, whether education or wealth, or civil freedom and recognition. We were utterly destitute. Possessing no homes nor the knowledge of how to make them, no money nor the habit of acquiring it, no education, no political status, no influence, what could we do?³²

Consequently, southern black women did not have the outlet, the resources, or the freedom to contextualize their experiences with southern black motherhood, as poverty, racism, and illiteracy took precedence. Specifically, in the South, there were several acts that prevented the education of enslaved peoples. These include the South Carolina Act of 1740 and the Virginia Revised Code of 1819 which not only forbid the education of slaves but encouraged corporal punishment.³³ In “Writing the Self into Being: Anna Julia

³¹ Anna J. Cooper, “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation: A Response to Fannie Barrier Williams (1893),” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including a Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 202.

³² *Ibid.*, 202

Cooper's Textual Politics," May illuminates Cooper's position on this silence, writing, "Cooper underscores how, for black women in particular, silence has often been violently imposed and not chosen. Such violence has a history—it is not merely the absence of sound."³⁴ In the context of black motherhood, forced surrogacy is representative of a silence that has been violently imposed. The author defines forced surrogacy as a pregnancy that is carried to term under oppressive conditions that result in an absence of choices.

Following an involuntary pregnancy, the responsibilities of child rearing are shifted. Occasionally, these responsibilities are involuntarily accepted by other mothers. The social implications of refusing these responsibilities force the acceptance of them. Although unintended and unwanted pregnancies are not limited to black women, black and Hispanic women have the highest rates of unintended and unwanted pregnancies in the United States. Consequently, black motherhood becomes obligatory rather than chosen. In climates of systemic oppression such as those in the South, black women are subject to unintended pregnancies, single motherhood, and socio economic factors that exasperate parenting.

According to "Unintended Pregnancies in the United States," 51% of pregnancies in the United States are unintended. This report also indicates the rates of unintended pregnancies are generally highest in the South, Southwest, and in densely populated

³³ William Goodell, "Slavery and the Making of America," PBS, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>.

³⁴ Vivian May, "Writing the Self Into Being: Anna Julia Cooper's Textual Politics," *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 22.

states.³⁵ (Note, the South also has the lowest literacy and graduation rates in the United States.) In 2008 black women had the highest unintended pregnancy results and poor women had an unintended birth rate nearly six times as higher than white women, college graduates and married women.³⁶ These health disparities impact how southern black women writers experience and interpret black motherhood.

In, “No Conspiracy Theories Needed,” Susan Cohen concludes that the one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective to reducing health disparities among black women. Cohen asserts, “Black women—as with all women—armed with accurate information and the ability to access necessary services, are eminently qualified and indeed entitled to make decisions about their own health and welfare.”³⁷ Susan Cohen’s article is essential to elucidating the silences imposed on black mothers because it identifies consequences of those silences such as health disparities that have the potential to create motherless

Although Anna Julia Cooper is known for textual dissemblance and silences in her works, “Cooper suggests that we must attend not only to the nameable or spoken, but also to the fact that there are silences that teach or reveal to us something about what cannot really be spoken, particularly as it relates to trauma and suffering.”³⁸ In the

³⁵ “Unintended Pregnancy in the United States,” Guttmacher Institute, March, 2016, accessed April 17, 2016, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/unintended-pregnancy-united-states>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Susan Cohen, “No Conspiracy Theories Needed: Abortion and Women of Color,” Guttmacher Institute, August 14, 2008, accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2008/08/no-conspiracy-theories-needed-abortion-and-women-color>.

³⁸ Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: a Critical Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 88.

context of black motherhood, textual dissemblance refers to the concealing or silencing of black women's experiences with motherhood. However, these silences speak volumes. Using "cooperative and dialectical" approaches, southern Black women writers "empower those who have been silenced by oppressive power structures."³⁹ Consequently, not only do southern black women writers illuminate their struggles, they shatter their silences. In "Special Focus Teacher, Scholar, and Timeless Womanist: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, 1858-1964," Mark Giles asserts that one of Cooper's best abilities as a writer is her ability to recognize that because so many black women have experienced the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism; they have a particular vantage point on what constitutes evidence, valid action, and morality.⁴⁰ As result of this understanding, southern black women writers are central to black women's literary traditions.

Cooper's work and the work of southern black women writers is a celebration of the creativity and wisdom that their mothers and other mothers did not have the time, education, or resources to actualize. By writing their stories, southern black women writers contextualize black motherhood and simultaneously capture their experiences, as they are lived. Without these contributions, black women's experiences are in danger of being lost or distorted.⁴¹ Alice Walker writes, "We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves

³⁹ Shirley Moody Turner, "A Voice Beyond the South: Re-Situating the Locus of Cultural Representation in the Later Writings of Anna Julia Cooper," *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009):65.

⁴⁰ Mark Giles, "Special Focus Teacher, Scholar, and Timeless Womanist: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, 1858-1964," *Journal of Negro Education* 75, no. 4 (2006): 621-34.

⁴¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 243

and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great grandmothers were not allowed to know.”⁴² Thus, it is necessary to examine the ways in which southern black women writers construct motherhood.

Recognizing this, Clenora Hudson Weems argues that naming is too critical of a process to be left in the hands of the dominant group.⁴³ When the dominant group attempts to define a culture in the context of its own, the essence of this culture is compromised and distorted. Recognizing this, southern black women writers name and construct their experiences in their fashion. Without the contributions of southern black women writers, Eurocentric paradigms will continue to determine the ways in which black mothers are constructed.

In an effort to shift this paradigm, Audre Lorde suggests mothering ourselves. Lorde writes, “Mothering ourselves means learning to love what we have given birth to by giving definition to, learning how to be both kind and demanding in the teeth of failure as well as in the face of success, and not misnaming either.”⁴⁴ Otherwise, as seen in the media and contemporary literature, when Eurocentric paradigms are permitted to define black motherhood, black mothers become the defined, not the definer. In an effort to paint a more realistic picture of black motherhood, the voices of southern black women writers must be a part of this vocation.

⁴² Ibid., 237.

⁴³ Nikol Alexander Floyd and Evelyn Simien, “Revisiting ‘What’s in a Name?’: Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27, no. 1 (2006): 70, accessed December 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137413>.

⁴⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 173.

In Their Words

Mothering themselves, Harriet Jacobs and Anna Julia Cooper, the first black women to publish in the South, use personal experiences to shape their understanding of black motherhood. Born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813, Harriet Jacobs is indebted to her maternal grandmother. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacob insinuates that the term mother extends past the delivery a child and defines anyone who participates in the nurturing of a child. For Jacobs, her grandmother plays a crucial role in the mother Jacobs becomes. Paying homage to her grandmother, Jacobs writes, “I had a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects.”⁴⁵ In Jacob’s retelling of life with Dr. Flint, Jacob recalls being forbidden to visit her grandmother. Jacobs writes, “I was frequently threatened with punishment if I stopped there; and my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or dinner. I was indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal.”⁴⁶ In Jacobs’ life, Grandmother Jacobs functions as a spiritual advisor, other mother, and friend.

Grandmother Jacobs’ commitment to the survival and wholeness of her entire people is demonstrated in her financial contributions to escapes, courageous behavior, and unwavering work ethic. In *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, Professor Sanchez writes, “You see, my grandmother was a woman who spoiled us outrageously, who to

⁴⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Dover Thrift Editions)*, Reprint ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,19.

just dared let me be.”⁴⁷ In “The “Grands and Greats” of Very Old Black Grandmothers,” Barbara Barer's examines the role that black grandmothers play in the lives of their grandchildren. Although this study is based in San Francisco and decades after Jacobs, Barer identifies universal factors and conditions that create bonds between grandmothers and their grandchildren. Barer determines that proximity; frequent interactions, consistent support, and surrogate parenting play significant roles in the relationships between grandmothers and their grandchildren. Barer's study reinforces the relationship that Jacobs elucidates in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Following the death of her mother, Jacob's relationship with her grandmother strengthens because of the time and support that her grandmother provides. Grandma Jacobs' execution of selflessness in defense of her children further shapes Jacobs construction of black motherhood.

Two decades later (1886), Anna Julia Cooper explicitly outlines the roles that black women play in motherhood. A native of the south, Cooper suggests that black motherhood is inclusive of both formal and informal educators. Cooper writes,

Her horizon is extended. Her sympathies are broadened and deepened and multiplied...She can commune with Socrates about the Damion he knew and to which she too can bear witness; she can revel in the majesty of Dante, the sweetness of Virgil, the simplicity of Homer, the strength of Milton...here, at last, can be communion without suspicion. friendship without misunderstanding; love without jealousy.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Sonia Sanchez, *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, ed. A. Joyce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 17.

⁴⁸ Anna J. Cooper, “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race,” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including a Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 82.

Although an advocate for formal and informal networks of education, Cooper desires a culturally holistic education for her people. Cooper believes in the unique vocation of all voices and ultimately, insinuates that black women must be versed in all networks of education.

Conceptual Framework

Black Feminist Standpoint theory, a conceptual framework coined by Patricia Hill Collins, is defined as an interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power. Black Feminist Standpoint Theory centers black women's narratives and therefore, serves as an effective framework for interpreting and analyzing southern black women writers' constructions of motherhood. In their respective memoirs, both Angelou and Walker articulate their understanding of motherhood in terms of their southern heritage and their positions as marginalized women.

The dual perspective available to Angelou and Walker, as southern black women writers posit them in a position to recognize the underlying assumptions that drive and shape the dynamics of power.⁴⁹ As a result, Angelou and Walker provide readers with a critical frame of reference derived from their experiences to potentially gain a better understanding of how southern black women writers construct motherhood. With training in qualitative methods, the researcher conducts a black Feminist textual analysis of the maternal relationships presented in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and, *In Search of*

⁴⁹ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Feminist Standpoint Theory," accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>.

Our Mothers' Gardens. The conceptual framework for this study is informed by feminist research methods. Unlike traditional feminist content analysis, black feminist content analysis allows the researcher to look at intersecting oppressions simultaneously.

This study uses black feminist textual analysis to examine how systemic oppression shapes southern black women writers' construction of motherhood. Embedded in black feminist textual analysis is Patricia Hill Collin's black feminist epistemology. Collins asserts that black feminist epistemology is made up of four characteristics. These characteristics include lived experiences, use of dialogue, ethics of caring, and personal accountability. These characteristics allow the researcher to distinguish specific experiences (black feminist content) that shape how Angelou and Walker perceive motherhood. In this context, the researcher defines black feminist content using the following components: consciousness of race, class, and gender issues, power imbalances as the result of the aforementioned oppression, and the frequency of the impact of these imbalances.

Limitations

Collectively, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker have authored over seventy-two books. Versed in several genres, Angelou and Walker have produced numerous collections of essays, poetry, novels, children's books, memoirs, cookbooks, and autobiographies. In addition to authorship, Angelou and Walker have also produced or appeared in numerous documentaries, mini-series, and interviews. The researcher purchased and read all seventy-two of the aforementioned books. Collectively, Angelou and Walker provide a plethora of texts that deserves a lengthy analysis. However, for the

parameters of this paper, all of Angelou and Walker's texts do not meet the specified criteria. The criteria for this research requires the examination of Angelou and Walker's memoirs and/or autobiographies. This stipulation alone reduces the data set from a possible seventy-two books to a pool of fifteen. After identifying the texts that specifically include variations of the term Mama, only two texts remain. In conducting a qualitative data analysis, the researcher did obtain and review several coding programs. Although the university offers some of the aforementioned programs for free, these editions are limited. Instead, the author focuses on Angelou and Walker's memoirs and autobiographical works, as these are the texts that highlight Angelou and Walker's maternal relationships. However, the researcher does acknowledge that each of the aforementioned genres possess unique hidden treasures.

The sheer volume of work produced by Maya Angelou and Alice Walker call for an extensive amount of analysis and lengthy amount of time. Although the author used supporting texts in the data analysis, the sample size for this project was two. In reviewing the memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, the researcher utilizes a narrative approach. With this approach, the researcher examines how Angelou and Walker interpret their maternal relationships. By doing so, the researcher develops an understanding of individual development within sociohistorical contexts.⁵⁰ Additionally, the researcher's reliance on pre-existing data (Angelou and Walker's recollection of their maternal relationships) also creates a limitation. Angelou and Walker's perception of their

⁵⁰ Collette Daiute, and Cynthia Lightfoot, *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2004), xii.

maternal relationships may be subject to selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1969, twenty-eight years after Angelou left the home of Annie Henderson. At the time of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* publication, Walker was 39. The researcher has to interpret and analyze these experiences at face value.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, numerous studies have identified western hegemonic ideals of motherhood and the manifestation of these ideals in black mothers. Per Patricia Hill Collins, “From this perspective, women’s activities are confined to the care of children, the nurturing of a husband, and the maintenance of the household.”⁵¹ Although Collins’s assertion is reflective of the dominant ideology, this ideology is a product of white patriarchy. In 2013, *Essence* conducted a study on black women in the media. According to this study, negative imagery of black women is seen twice as frequently as positive imagery.⁵² These images include gold diggers, modern jezebels, baby mamas, uneducated sisters, ratchet women, angry black women, mean black girls, unhealthy black women, and black Barbies.

Presently, these controlling images of black women run rampant in Eurocentric views of black motherhood. Contrary to the aforementioned paradigms, black mothers have never had the privilege of separate gender roles. Historically, black mothers have

⁵¹ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/daughter Relationships,” *SAGE* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 3-10.

⁵² Dawnie Walton, “[Http: //www.essence.com/2013/10/07/essence-images-study-bonus-insights,](http://www.essence.com/2013/10/07/essence-images-study-bonus-insights)” *Essence*, October 7, 2013, accessed April 5, 2016,<http://www.essence.com/2013/10/07/essence-images-study-bonus-insights>.

always been responsible for child rearing, domestic duties, and financial support. Even with a husband present, when parenting in systemic oppression, black mothers raise children as overworked, single black mothers. The dominant ideology presented is not representative of black women's experiences with motherhood. Despite this reality, few scholars have defined black motherhood, examined the meaning of black motherhood, or investigated the significance of black motherhood in black mother-daughter relationships. In this chapter, the author investigates black motherhood studies. First, the author provides an overview of black motherhood studies. Then, the author examines historical views and depictions of black mothers, as created by Eurocentric paradigms. Following the aforementioned examination, the author reveals how historical distortions continue to influence contemporary images of black mothers. Based on this review, the author concludes that the aforementioned disparities, distortions, and omissions continue to perpetuate controlling images of black mothers.

Black Motherhood: An Overview

Black women writers have produced numerous collections of essays, poetry, short stories, autobiographies, novels, and memoirs that illuminate their experiences with motherhood. It is through these works that black women writers define black motherhood, examine the meaning of motherhood in their lives, and/or investigate the significance of motherhood in mother-daughter relationships. Collins writes, "Collectively, Black women's autobiographies and fiction can be read as texts revealing multiple strategies employed by Black mothers in preparing their daughters for the

demands of being Black in oppressive conditions.”⁵³ In Collins’s article, Collins asserts that black daughters are exposed to common themes about the meaning of womanhood in black culture. For Collins, these include:

- Othermothers: Women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities
- Providing as Part of Mothering: Work done by African-American women in providing the economic resources essential to Black family well-being
- Community Othermothers and Social Activism: Black women’s feeling of responsibility and accountability to all the Black community’s children
- Motherhood as a Symbol of Power: Specific contributions that Black mothers make for their families and communities in an effort to create self-reliance and independence

Collins’s “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships,” suggests that black women, specifically black mothers are the ancestral and cultural gatekeepers of the black community. Furthering Collins assertion, in “A Qualitative Study of the Black Mother-Daughter Relationship: Lessons Learned About Self-Esteem, Coping, and Resilience,” Joyce E. Everet, Laverne D. Marks, and Jean F. Clarke-Mitchell examine the influence that black mothers have on their daughters’ development. In this article, the aforementioned authors suggest that self-esteem, coping, and resilience are fundamental lessons transferred from black mothers to daughters.

Collectively, Collins, Everet, Marks, and Clarke-Mitchell suggest that in the black community, the meaning of black motherhood is monumental. Here, black mothers

⁵³ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/daughter Relationships,” *SAGE* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 7.

function as teachers and community leaders who nurture and preserve cultural traditions. Consequently, the role of black mothers is central to the continuance of black culture.

Similar to Collins, in “Is Black Motherhood a Marker of Oppression or Empowerment? Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons about “Mama”, Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown conclude that black motherhood is a symbol of meaning, satisfaction, empowerment, and respect within black women, the black family, and the black community, more broadly. For Chaney and Brown, Hip-Hop and R&B artists define black mothers as sources of emotional support, strength/self-confidence, and as teachers/disciplinarians. Chaney and Brown go on to conclude that motherhood instills and provides unconditional love. Chaney and Brown’s research suggests that in the black community, the parental role of black mothers is superior to fatherhood. Chaney and Brown’s research is significantly undeveloped and essentialist in origin, as it does not offer a clear or solid methodology and it embraces hegemonic ideals of motherhood. However, on the surface level, Chaney and Brown’s research further emphasize the meaning of black mothers to the black community. In the fifty-nine Hip Hop and R&B lyrics examined by Chaney and Brown, black artists generally revere their mothers but are less admirable and accountable towards the mothers of their children. In this, Chaney and Brown find that poverty, single parenthood, and physical/emotional abuse impact the meaning of motherhood in the black community. Under these conditions, the black-mother daughter relationship is strained.

Contrary to Collins’s study that emphasizes an archetypal motherhood by suggesting that black mothers are generally devoted, self-sacrificing, and understanding,

Gloria Wade Gayles suggests that studies like Collins's produce "one dimensional portraits that highlight mothers as influences rather than as individuals with whom daughters live and against whom daughters sometimes struggle."⁵⁴ Contrary to autobiographies that may exclude the "cathexis between mother and daughter," Gayles' argues that the "truth of our mothers" is sometimes "cruel enough to stop the blood."⁵⁵ Gayles article illuminates there is little research regarding the meaning of motherhood for black women who do not voluntarily choose motherhood. Throughout Gayles' article, Gayle gives numerous examples of tumultuous black mother-daughter relationships. Most notably, Gayle cites Alice Walker's *Meridan*. In Gayle's analysis, Gayles asserts that every woman does not desire to be a mother and every woman should not be a mother. Gayles is specifically referring to Mrs. Hill, Meridian's mother. In Gayles' example, Mrs. Hill asks, "Have you stolen anything?" Interceding for Meridian, Gayle writes, "Meridian understands that in, being born and remaining alive, she has stolen her mother's life."⁵⁶ In this statement, Gayles makes a crucial revelation. Although many black women are mothers or by virtue of being woman, possess the ability and capacity to give life, motherhood does not always function as a site of power. For women like Mrs. Hill, motherhood is oppressive, suffocating, and unwanted. Gayles writes,

Black women are not a monolithic group with the same needs, the same strengths, the same weaknesses, and the same dreams. They are variegated flowers in a garden of

⁵⁴ Gloria Wade Gayles, "The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction," *SAGE* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

humanity. Some of the have the personality makeup to handle the experience of motherhood in a sexist culture. Others, like Mrs. Hills, need to be unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements of a husband.⁵⁷

Unlike Collins's, Gayles suggests that the meaning of motherhood varies drastically for black women. While it can function as a site of power and empowerment, Gayles demonstrates how it can also function as the polar opposite. For the women cited in Gayles' article, motherhood functions as a site of bondage. As result, these women are unable to form affectionate or meaningful bonds with their daughters. Although the fiction that Gayles cites mainly describes mother-daughter relationships that are strained by poverty and single parent households, Gayles' article identifies the need for comprehensive research concerning black women who do not choose motherhood.

Black Motherhood: A Typology

Black mothers are the pillars of the black community. Both Sonia Sanchez, a southern black woman writer, and Tupac Shakur, the son of a southern black woman writer, are artists who per the author have authored two of the greatest odes to black mothers of all time. In Sonia Sanchez and Tupac Shakur's, "Dear Mama," both artists create a typology of black motherhood that both acknowledges the systemic oppression that black mothers parent in, the difficulties of raising a child, and how this shapes their quality of parenting. Shakur recites,

And even though we had different daddy's, the same drama
When things went wrong we'd blame mama
I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell

⁵⁷ Gloria Wade Gayles, "The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction," *SAGE* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 11.

Hugging on my mama from a jail cell
 And who'd think in elementary?
 Hey! I see the penitentiary, one day
 And running from the police, that's right
 Mama catch me, put a whooping t`o my backside⁵⁸

Despite critiquing the conditions that influence his mother's ability to parenting, Shakur glorifies black motherhood, noting that a black mother's love is second only to God's.⁵⁹ In "Dear Mama," the black community's ode to black mothers, Tupac highlights Afeni Shakur, a black mother who demonstrates agency over her own life, even in systems of oppression. Tupac writes,

And even as a crack fiend, mama
 You always was a black queen, mama
 I finally understand
 for a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man
 You always was committed
 A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it⁶⁰

Despite battling a crack addiction, poverty, and single parenthood, Afeni raises a revolutionary. Although Eurocentric paradigms would label Afeni as abusive, criminal, and unfit to raise a child, Afeni's ability to raise Tupac in spite of the aforementioned circumstances position motherhood as a site of power. "Dear Mama" constructs black mothers in terms of wisdom, selflessness, and devotion. Shakur continues,

And never left me alone because you cared for me
 And I could see you comin home after work late

⁵⁸ Tupac Shakur, "Dear Mama," AZ Lyrics, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/2pac/dearmama.html>.

⁵⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, "The Hood's Mother," in *Holler If You Hear Me* (2006), Reprint ed. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 21.

⁶⁰ Tupac Shakur, "Dear Mama," AZ Lyrics, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/2pac/dearmama.html>.

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 Thanksgivin⁶¹

Again, Tupac calls attention to the systemic oppression created by European paradigms that create a unique typology of black motherhood. Unlike the nuclear family, black mothers are often the head of their households and therefore, work outside the home. As a result, black mothers do not always have a physical presence. Contrary to white scholars who suggest that physical absences are equivalent to an absence of love, Dear Mama reveals that a physical absence is suggestive of the greatest love of all, a black mother who loves her kids so much, she is willing to work tirelessly to ensure that they are equipped with the tools for survival. Sometimes the greatest expression of love a parent can give is a physical absence. Tupac's "Dear Mama", an ode to his own Mother, creates an alternate typology of black motherhood. Essentially, Dear Mama reveals that a black mother can be a drug addict, a welfare recipient, a single parent, and still parent.

Preceding Shakur, Sanchez's "Dear Mama," also glorifies her mother's contributions. Sanchez writes:

My life flows from you Mama. My style comes from
 a long line of Louises who picked me up in the nite to keep me
 from wetting the bed. A long line of Sarahs who fed me and
 my sister and fourteen other children from watery soups and beans
 and a lot of imagination. A long line of Lizzies who made me understand love.
 Sharing. Holding a child up to the stars.
 Holding your tribe in a grip of love.
 A long line of Black people holding each other up against silence.⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Sonia Sanchez, *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems (Bluestreak)* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000), 29.

As Sanchez elucidates, her mother and a long line of black mothers taught her to use motherhood as a means of survival. By doing so, motherhood allows black women to assume agency over their lives. Although poverty, unemployment, and single parenthood impact the quality of this agency, black mothers enable their children to thrive in spite of this. Sanchez's "Dear Mama" presents a typology of black motherhood that posits black mothers as definers of their existence.

In Sanchez and Shakur's respective versions of "Dear Mama," Sanchez and Shakur engage how black mothers define their existences versus how non-black people define these existences, essentially engaging the idea of a double consciousness. Preceding W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper argues that black women are constantly battling within the axes of their identities. Cooper writes,

The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.⁶³

Extending Cooper's argument, the author argues that in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker

⁶³ Anna J. Cooper, "The Status of Woman in America," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including a Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 112.

engage and disrupt the double consciousness embedded in black motherhood to create an alternate image of black mothering.

Southern Black Women Writers on Motherhood

Double Stitch offers a collection of poems, stories, and essays by black women writers that detail the celebrations and struggles of black motherhood. The author deems this work important because it features the diversity of southern black women writer's experiences with motherhood. Although these writers are not included in the primary dataset because they did not meet all the eligibility criteria, these writers are featured in two of the three required texts. As black women's experiences with motherhood are not monolithic, Gloria Wade-Gayles, bell hooks, Naomi Madgett, Sonia Sanchez, and Margaret Walker offer unique themes to southern constructions of black motherhood.

Gloria Wade Gayles, a native of Memphis, Tennessee, grew up in the segregated South with her mother, Bertha Reese Wade. At the time of Gayles' upbringing, Bertha recalls impoverished beginnings and the bitter hate of the confederate South. Born in 1937, Gayles witnesses the relentless racism that her family endures. In the beginning of *Connected to Mama's Spirit*, Gayles recalls her hate for the South, specifically Mississippi. Gayle writes, "Mama was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the oldest child of an A.M.E. minister and a strong willed mother who had more experiences with pain than Mississippi had mean peckerwoods...I hated Mississippi, grew up hating it."⁶⁴ While in Mississippi, Gayles recalls her widowed grandmother struggling to make ends meet.

⁶⁴ Gloria Wade-Gayles, "Connected to Mama's Spirit," in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*, Reprint ed., ed. Patricia Bell-Scott et al. (New York: Perennial, 1993), 218.

Throughout *Connected to Mama's spirit*, Gayles details numerous confrontations with racism. When Gayles' mother was a child, her stepfather who Bertha describes as mean and abusive, was forced to move the family out of Mississippi overnight because a white man requested Bertha's grandmother. Gayles recalls her mother noting, "But I can say one good for him. He would turn any of his girls over to white men."⁶⁵ In this excerpt, Gayles' illuminated what black female adolescence resembles in the South. Specifically, in Mississippi, Gayles reveals how the South forces black girls to become women long before their ages do.

In addition to the southern heritage that Gayles shares with Angelou and Walker, Gayles introduces the reader to a dimension where the spirits of the living and dead coexist. Throughout her life, Mrs. Wade alludes to a deep sense of spirituality, specifically premonitions and psychic feelings. As an adolescent, Mrs. Wade often tells her, "People get them. All the time. You can feel someone thinking about you, pulling you toward them."⁶⁶ Although Gayles shares her mother's psychic feelings, Gayle does not accept them as truth until the passing of her mother. Gayles construction of black motherhood in terms of spirituality differs from the themes outlined by Collins. *Connected to Mama's spirit* further illustrates that although southern black women writers share a geography, black motherhood is not monolithic.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 214.

In *Reflections of a “Good” Daughter*, bell hooks, a native of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, highlights the plight of black motherhood. In detailing the ways in which her mother socializes her for survival, hooks reveals the cost. hooks writes, She is the one person who looks into my heart, sees its needs, and tries to satisfy them. She is also always trying to make me be what she thinks it is best for me to be. She tells me how to do my hair, what clothes I should wear. She wants to love and control at the same time.⁶⁷ hooks’ mother socializes her to internalize her emotions. As hooks elucidates, her mother has no time for pain. *Reflections of a “Good” Daughter* speaks to the miserable social conditions that black mothers often raise children in. Despite being ill, hooks’ mother continues to push forward. For this, hooks cannot imagine life without her mother. When hooks conveys this, her mother becomes angry. In “The Mama That Yelled: Black Mothering Through Depression,” Iresha Picot writes,

My mama was unhappy in her own life. Even with a husband present, she was raising her children up as an overworked, Single Black Mother. She fell into her own stereotypes. In Black communities, Black women aren’t supposed to crack. We are not supposed to become depressed, even when we experience poverty, poor and unstable living conditions, psychosocial challenges, and white supremacy.⁶⁸

Although hooks does not confirm if her mother suffers from mental illness, hooks recalls her mother refusing to acknowledge or share her feelings. Throughout Hook’s life, she becomes accustomed to internalizing pain. When hooks’ mom is diagnosed with

⁶⁷bell hooks, “Reflections of a “Good” Daughter,” in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*, Reprint ed., ed. Patricia Bell-Scott et al. (New York: Perennial, 1993), 149.

⁶⁸ Iresha Picot, “The Mama That Yelled: Black Mothering through Depression,” *For Harriet*, November, 2015, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.forharriet.com/2015/11/the-mama-that-yelled-Black-mothering.html#axzz45ZakL6y>.

cancer, rather than face reality, hooks' mother voluntarily plans her funeral and continues with regularly scheduled activities. When hook attempts to disclose her fears, hooks' mother refuses to listen. Hooks' story speaks to the impact that systemic oppression has on black women's mental health.

Unique to the aforementioned constructions of southern motherhood, in "Dear Mama," Sonia Sanchez introduces metaphysical nurturing. The researcher defines metaphysical nurturing as an abstract rearing that occurs posthumously. Furthering this definition, the researcher argues that metaphysical nurturing is an abstract nurturing that is transferred in death from a caretaker to an entrusted man or woman whose spirituality is most like the deceased. In examining metaphysical nurturing in Sanchez's "Dear Mama," Sanchez highlights the influences her late mother had on her life.

Despite her physical absence, Sanchez saw remnants of her mother manifested in the women around her. Understanding Sanchez's loss, in, "Losing a mother early shapes a woman's emotional terrain for life," Sandra Banks recalls the loss of her mother and how this loss affects her emotional well-being. Although Banks was nineteen when she lost her mother and has children of her own, Banks recalls her mother's wisdom. At the end of "Losing a mother early shapes a woman's emotional terrain for life," Banks writes,

So when my now-grown daughters ask what I need for Mother's Day,
I tell them what my mother used to tell me: Get along with your sisters.
Don't bicker or complain or hurt each other's feelings. Because the day

is coming when each other is all that you will have, I need to know that you'll remember: We are still a family. And Mommy's love lives on.⁶⁹

Banks' statements are powerful because they demonstrate how mothers, even in their absence, can love fiercely, tenderly, and relentlessly. Consequently, metaphysical nurturing offers a unique addition to southern constructions of black motherhood.

Contemporary Representations of Black Mothers in the Media

Contrary to the overwhelming number of black mothers residing in the South, the voices of southern black women writers are absent in the depictions of black mothers in the media. As a result, the media continues to perpetuate stereotypical and controlling images of black mothers. When black mothers cannot or refuse to adhere to Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood, black mothers are held accountable for the demise of the black community. As a result, the media portrays black mothers as abusive, inattentive, and uneducated. According to Melissa Harris-Perry, one of the most recognized examples of this is from the movie *Precious*, directed by Lee Daniels. *Precious* is based on Sapphire's novel, *Push*, a fictional novel that details the life of Claireece Precious Jones, an obese and illiterate 16-year-old girl who lives in Harlem with her mother Mary. Sapphire, born off the coast of California, offers a depiction of black motherhood that is consistent with the stereotypical images portrayed by the media.

Perry writes, "At the core of the film is Precious' unimaginably brutal mother. She is an unredeemed monster who brutalizes her daughter verbally, emotionally,

⁶⁹ Sandra Banks, "Losing a Mother Early Shapes a Woman's Emotional Terrain for Life," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2014, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-banksmotherless-daughters-20140503-column.html>.

physically and sexually. This mother pimps both her daughter and the government. Stealing her daughter's childhood and her welfare payments."⁷⁰ Although Mary, Precious' mom, is a part of Hollywood's depiction of black motherhood, Mary's character is situated in a long tradition of pathologizing black motherhood. Consequently, the popular embrace of monstrous black mothers is problematic. Not only does it perpetrate negative stereotypes, it encourages the devaluation and criminalization of black motherhood.

In the last fourteen years, black women have been rewarded for their portrayals of stereotypical black mothers. As of date, Forbes, the Academy Awards, the Grammy's, and the Golden Globe awards are the most watched award shows. Specifically, the Academy Awards and the Golden Globe Awards offer awards for the best actresses and the best actresses in supporting roles. In Academy Award history, Halle Berry is and remains the only African-American woman to have earned best actress. In 2002, Halle Berry received this for her role in *Monster's Ball*. In *Monster's Ball*, Berry plays Leticia, a widow and single mom. In addition to financial struggles that result in the loss of her home and car, Leticia verbally abuses her son who is later killed. Reverend Irene Monroe writes, "The historical legacy of the devaluation and demonization of black motherhood was both applauded and rewarded at this year's Oscars. And the point was clearly illustrated with Mo'Nique, capturing the gold statue for best supporting actress."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "Why Is the Media So Obsessed With Horrifying Images of African-American Mothers?," *Hip Hop and Politics*, December 9, 2009, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2009/12/08/why-is-the-media-so-obsessed-with-horrifying-images-of-african-american-mothers/>.

Although three black women (Monique, Octavia Spencer, and Lupita Nyong'o) recently earned Academy Awards for best supporting actresses, these awards were granted for playing an unfit black mother, a mammy, and an enslaved mistress.

On the heels of Mo'Nique and for a similar role, in January of 2016, Taraji P. Henson won a Golden Globe Award for her role in *Empire*. In *Empire*, Cookie is an ex-felon and mother of three. In Henson's award speech, Henson exclaims, "Cookies for everyone tonight. My treat. Formpress, thank you. Who knew that playing an ex-convict would take me all around the globe? It just goes to show - I thought it would be Queenie-Will, I thought it would be well--um my character from *Karate Kid* but it's Cookie who spent seventeen years in jail for selling crack. Ok. So the world loves real..."⁷²In both *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and *Karate Kid*, Henson plays an endearing black mother who did and would have done anything for her children. Contrary to controlling and stereotypical images of black mothers, Henson's character portrayals in the aforementioned movies present positive images of black mothers. Ironically, Henson did not win a Golden Globe for these roles nor was she nominated. However, in *Empire*, where Henson plays an ex-convict and mother of three, where viewers again see stereotypical images of black mothers, Henson is not only nominated for a Golden Globe award for the first time but wins it. Contrary to her roles in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and the *Karate Kid*, in *Empire*, Cookie is often portrayed as a

⁷¹ Irene Monroe, "La Progressive," *LA Progressive*, March 11, 2010, accessed April 10, 2016, <https://www.laprogressive.com/Black-motherhood-lost-oscars/>.

⁷² Taraji Henson, "Taraji P. Henson's Golden Globes Speech" (video), January 10, 2016, accessed April 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhMJLk1_Ke8&nohtml5=False.

monstrous black mother. Often, Cookie's actions are marked as vindictive, abusive, and hypersexual.

While black women win awards for portraying controlling images of black mothers, white women win awards for executing Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood. For example, in 2010, Sandra Bullock won seven awards for her role in *The Blind Side*. In *The Blind Side*, based on a true story, Sandra Bullock plays Leigh Anne Tuohy, a wife and mother. In *The Blindsight*, Leigh and her family decide to adopt a black child. These perspectives transfer from the screen into real life perceptions of black motherhood. Most recently, in Greensboro, Georgia, Shaniaya Hunter released a recording of her history teacher, Cory Hunter exclaiming, "Your purpose gonna be to have sex and have children as you ain't never going to be smart."⁷³ Not only did Mr. Hunter perpetrate the Jezebel stereotype, Mr. Hunter blamed Hunter for her disadvantaged position in society. This same attitude was embraced during enslavement. Mr. Hunter's comments perpetrate Hollywood depictions of black motherhood.

When the voices of southern black women writers are included in discourses and Hollywood portrayals of black motherhood, positive imagery of black mothers arise. In *The Color Purple*, written by Alice Walker and directed by Steven Spielberg, Walker introduces Celie, Sofia, Nettie, and Shug Avery. Throughout the novel, Walker depicts the aforementioned women as mothers and other mothers. While growing up in the

⁷³ Stephan Crockett, "Ga. Teacher to Student Report: 'your Purpose' Is to 'have Sex and Have Children Because You Ain't Gonna Never Be Smart'," *The Root*, March 8, 2016, accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2016/03/ga_teacher_to_student_your_purpose_is_to_have_sex_and_have_children_because/.

South, Celie, Sofia, Nettie, and Shug Avery experience racism, sexism, and sexual abuse. Even so, the aforementioned women raise each other and their daughters to endure systematic oppression. Instead of hypersexual, illiterate, and abusive mothers, we see sisterhood, sexual freedom, and wisdom. Although Celie, Sofia, Nettie, and Shug Avery are not formally educated, viewers constantly see these women out-wit their male counterparts. For example, when Mister's father disrespects Celie, rather than pursue a verbal altercation and risk a beating, Celie spits in his drink. As a result of their influences, these women began to look to each other for guidance, support, and leadership. Walker, a southern black woman writer, does not depict black mothers in terms of Eurocentric paradigms. *In The Color Purple*, black mothers function as leaders. When the men in their lives serve as abusers or rapists, the women fight back, whether physically or intellectually. For example, throughout her marriage to Harpo, Sofia refuses to submit to his attempts to control her. Walker writes,

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy.
 I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles.
 A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have
 to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say.
 God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me.⁷⁴

Despite a long tradition of physical abuse, Sofia refuses to continue to endure her husband's abuse. Shortly after the aforementioned conversation with Celie, Sophia leaves. When Harpo acquires a girlfriend, Sofia puts up a fight. As other mothers, Celie and Shug teach Sofia how to fight, mentally and physically. When Sofia is approached by

⁷⁴Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando, FL: Mariner Books, 2003), 54.

Miss Millie, the mayor's wife, and asked to be her maid, Sofia refuses. After responding with “Hell no,” Sofia is asked to repeat what she said. When she does, Sofia is hit by the mayor. Rather than retreat or submit, Sofia fights back, knocking the mayor out. Despite enduring a brutal beating, rape, and a twelve-year jail sentence. Sofia survives. In her absence, Harpo's girlfriend cares for her children. Despite the harsh realities of the South, Alice Walker does not revert to controlling images of black mothers. Instead, Walker shows how racism, sexism, and classism impacts the quality of parenting that black mothers are able to give. In addition, we do not see Celie, Sofia, Shug, or Nettie parent in two parent households. Even after marriage, all of these women continue to independently raise children and work outside the home. Walker shows how the convergence of oppression shapes southern black motherhood. Not only does she illustrate how systemic oppression influences how black mothers socialize their children, Walker does not blame black mothers for how they cope or endure life in the rural South. When southern black women's voices are inserted in Hollywood narratives, positive images of black mothers emerge.

Similar to Walker, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston, a Southern black women writer, born and raised in Florida, narrates the story of Janie Crawford, a black woman, on a journey to find herself. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston introduces Nanny, Janie's grandmother. Born enslaved, Nanny was raped by her owner and involuntarily impregnated with Janie's mother, Leafy. As a teenager, Leafy is raped and becomes impregnated with Janie. Unable to deal with this trauma or the burdens of raising a child, Leafy leaves Nanny to raise her daughter. Very early,

Hurston shows how generational oppression impacts the ways in which Nanny and Leafy mother. For the first sixteen years of Janie's life, Nanny serves as a grandmother and other mother. Nanny insists,

So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule ud de world so fur as Ah can see.⁷⁵

In the aforementioned quote, Nanny essentially informs Janie that black women are the mules of the world. Every struggle and celebration is dependent on her. In preparation for these responsibilities, Nanny socializes Janie for survival. Placing the same aspirations on Janie as she had for Leafy, Janie's mother, Nanny insist that Janie most get married and start a family. As Nanny ages, she recognizes that she will not be around too much longer to care for Janie. Consequently, Nanny teaches Janie how to perform domestic duties, find work, and sustain a marriage. For Nanny, these are key components to survive life in the South. Even though Janie does not personally see Nanny sustain a marriage and does not desire a loveless one, Janie accepts all Nanny has to give. After Nanny catches Janie with a boy and in fear of Janie becoming like Leafy, Janie's mother, Nanny immediately locates a husband for Janie. Although Janie initially refuses, out of respect for her grandmother, Janie consents. Here, Hurston demonstrates the creativity, work ethic, and obedience that black mothers instill in their daughters. Hurston refutes Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes and characterizes Nanny as a leader.

⁷⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Knoxville: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 19.

When southern black women writers are permitted to participate in narratives surrounding black motherhood, black mothers are portrayed positively and fondly. On the contrary, when southern black women writers are left out of these narratives, black mothers are cast as monstrous, hypersexual, and uneducated. Statistically, this is not who black mothers are.

Criminalization of Black Motherhood

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan indicts black mothers for the deterioration of the black family. Moynihan writes, “The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”⁷⁶ By placing black motherhood in juxtaposition to American society, Moynihan offers black motherhood as a mutation rather than an extension. Michael Eric Dyson writes, “If the mother is central in black life, she is also made a scapegoat for the social disintegration of Black culture.”⁷⁷ Collins further addresses the criminalization of black motherhood, particularly by white male scholars. Similar to the Moynihan report, in mainstream media, black mothers are accused of failing to discipline their children, feminizing their sons, and interfering with academic development. White scholars often cite high rates of divorce, female headed households, and out-of-wedlock births for the

⁷⁶ Daniel P. Moynihan "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965)." *African American Male Research* (1997), 18.

⁷⁷ Michael Eric Dyson, “Dear Mama: Motherhood and a Hood’s Mother,” in *Holler If You Hear Me* (2006), Reprint ed. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 22.

deterioration of the black family. Dorothy Roberts writes, “For three centuries, Black mothers have been thought to pass down to their offspring the traits that marked them inferior to any white person. Along with this biological impairment, it is believed that Black mothers transfer a deviant lifestyle to their children that dooms each succeeding generation to a life of poverty, delinquency, and despair.”⁷⁸ The Moynihan report’s depiction of black mothers is a reflection of the dominant American psyche.

Throughout “Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers,” Dorothy Roberts illustrates how the attitudes presented in the Moynihan report disproportionately impact black mothers. For failing to uphold Eurocentric ideals of motherhood and therefore contributing to the deterioration of the black family, the aforementioned systems implement systemic punishment. Presently, African-American children account for fifteen percent of the children living in the United States and yet, thirty-seven percent of the children in foster care are African-American.⁷⁹ As the prison and foster care system are disproportionately poor and African-American, foster care involvement and the incarceration of black women makes it extremely difficult for black mothers to regain custody of their children. Once removed from their mothers, black youth remain in foster care longer, are moved more often, receive fewer services, and are less likely to be either returned home or adopted than any other children. Roberts writes,

⁷⁸ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 8.

⁷⁹ Fred Wulczyn, “Racial Disparity in Foster Care Admissions,” Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2007, accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/racial-disparity-foster-care-admissions>.

Stereotypes about Black female criminality and irresponsibility legitimate the massive disruption that both systems inflict on Black families and communities. A popular mythology promoted over centuries portrays Black women as unfit to bear and raise children. The sexually licentious Jezebel, the family-demolishing Matriarch, the devious Welfare Queen, the depraved pregnant crack addict accompanied by her equally monstrous crack baby—all paint a picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished. Unmarried Black women represent the ultimate irresponsible mothers—women who raises their children without the supervision of a man.⁸⁰

While traditional and contemporary depictions of white motherhood uphold a nuclear American family, 72% of black youth are born to unwed black single mothers. As a result, black mothers, specifically single black mothers are stigmatized and targeted. One of the policies that disproportionately impacts black mothers is the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997. As a result of this provision, the Department of Family and Children Services can file a termination of parental rights for any child who has been in foster care fifteen of the past twenty-two months. Unlike their white counterparts, black mothers are less likely to regain custody of their children, as not only do environmental racial disparities exist, there are discrepancies in services. These include availability, access, funding, housing, childcare, transportation, etc. Additionally, as ASFA requires criminal records checks of prospective foster or adoptive parents, this often prevents kinship/foster placements. The prison and foster care system ensure the systematic punishment of black mothers for failing to comply with traditional definitions of motherhood. As a result, the very institution of black motherhood is criminalized.

⁸⁰ Dorothy Roberts, "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers," *UCLA Law Review* 59, no. 1 (August 1, 2012): 1492, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.uclalawreview.org/pdf/59-6-2.pdf>.

In “Jezebels, Welfare Queens--And Now, Criminally Bad Black Moms,” Julianne Hing analyzes the evolution of the criminalization black motherhood. In Hing's article, Hing discusses the prosecution of Raquel Nelson, a black mother, who was blamed for the death of her son. In April of 2010, Nelson's son was killed by a hit and run drunk driver. Ironically, Nelson was charged with vehicular manslaughter and found guilty by an all-white jury. While Nelson was sentenced to community service, the driver of the vehicle only served six months in jail. Even though Nelson was granted a new trial, Hing’s article reveals that black motherhood continues to be targeted and criminalized. Paraphrasing Dorothy Roberts, Hing writes,

It's just a long history of negative stereotypes of Black women that have changed over time to suit the political circumstances, but that focus on our irresponsible childrearing and mothering. The thread that joins them is the idea of total sexual immorality and irresponsible reproductive responsibility on the part of Black women, who become a burden on the state and also have no maternal bond with their own children.⁸¹

Hing also shares the story of Jerry Gray, a single black mother, who lost her son to foster care as a result of him being obese. In addition to Gray losing her son, Gray was also charged with criminal neglect. As of 2011, Gray's charges remained pending. Gray writes, “Where poor Black mothers are concerned, compassion's in short supply, but there's plenty of blame to hand over.”⁸² When black mothers cannot fulfill Eurocentric

⁸¹ Julianna Hing, “Jezebels, Welfare Queens--and Now, Criminally Bad Black Moms,” Colorlines, August 8, 2011, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/jezebels-welfare-queens-and-now-criminally-bad-Black-moms>.

⁸² Ibid.

traditions of motherhood, black mothers are punished for their disadvantaged positions in society.

In addition to the external criminalization of black motherhood, black mothers are also subject to internal hypocrisy. In, “Of Victorianism, Civilizationism, and Progressivism: The Educational Idea of Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois, 1892-1940,” W.E.B. Du Bois delivers a speech at Spelman in which he asserts, “I wish, therefore, to impress upon these young women of Spelman, both graduate and undergraduates, the duty of motherhood—the hard work of bringing forth and rearing children, the physical burden of peopling the future earth, as the first and greatest function of their lives.”⁸³ Du Bois’ statements are essentialist in origin but reflect the attitudes and collective consciousness of his time period. Du Bois fails to acknowledge the oppressive conditions that interfere in black women’s ability to rear children. In, “Considering Motherhood and Murdering Black Children,” Monica Simpson writes, “To be a mother is to worry about your child’s future and their safety. It is sleepless nights hoping they will succeed and find a place in the world. It is wanting the best for them. But to be a black woman in the United States it is also to worry if your child will make it home from school, from work, from the store or from a friend’s house without being killed.”⁸⁴ Despite Du Bois’ attempts to force black motherhood into Victorian ideals, Simpson

⁸³ Derrick Aldridge, “Of Victorianism, Civilizationism, and Progressivism: The Educational Idea of Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois, 1892-1940,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (November 2007): 429.

⁸⁴ Monica Simpson, “Considering Motherhood and Murdered Black Children,” *Ebony*, August 18, 2015, accessed October 6, 2015, http://www.ebony.com/life/considering-motherhood-and-murdered-Black-children-503#.Vd8_U4XAC5s.facebook.

reveals that black women do not parent under the same conditions, socially, politically, or economically.

As an example, in the summer of 1955 while visiting his uncle in the rural South, Emmitt Till was kidnapped, tortured, and killed for allegedly making advances towards a white woman. Till was found in the Mississippi River with a hundred-pound cotton gin around his neck, a gunshot to his skull, and a missing eye. Even so, Mamie Till Bradley, the mother of Emmitt Till, was blamed for her son's death. In particular, a southern white woman stated, "She should have had better sense than to let such a child come here."⁸⁵ Bradley's credentials as a mother and working single mother were often under scrutiny. The story of Mamie Till Bradley reinforces Simpson's assertions that there is a divergence between black motherhood and the Victorian ideals of motherhood. Du Bois' failure to recognize these differences sustain a distorted reality.

Although black women's literary traditions create a space for black women writers to differentiate their lived experiences from the dominant group, Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood produce a typology of black motherhood that does not reflect black women's articulations of their experiences with motherhood. Ignoring the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, dominant typologies of motherhood suggest that black mothers are single parents who rely on government assistance to care for their children.

Even so, the Nutrition Assistance Program Report estimates that only 23% of black people are welfare recipients, compared to 34% of their white counterparts.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ Pr, 2000), 97.

Dorothy Roberts argues, “Maternalist rhetoric has no appeal in the case of black welfare mothers because society sees no value in supporting their domestic service. The public views these mothers as less fit, less caring, and less hurt by separation from their children.”⁸⁷ As a result, black mothers are both stigmatized for receiving benefits and still stigmatized when they do not. In theory black mothers have progressed from the Mammy figure, the ideal black mother, in Eurocentric paradigms. However, in practice, by refusing to adhere to the Mammy standard, Eurocentric paradigms portray black mothers as careless and unfit to raise children. The aforementioned typology of black motherhood stems from a racial and gender caste system that has restricted black mothers from defining their experiences with motherhood. Aligning with these ideologies, black and white scholars suggest that black mothers socialize their daughters to survive white superiority and systemic oppression. However, this research suggests that black mothers situate their daughters in positions of power. In the black family, the mother/daughter relationship is among the most powerful. While the author does not disagree that black mothers raise their daughters to be strong, independent, and self-sustaining, the author extends this argument to suggest that motherhood is a means of survival. When black mothers, specifically southern black mothers have a say in constructions of motherhood, black motherhood is honored, empowered, and reinvented. Consequently, Southern black

⁸⁶ Anna Gibson, “The Myth of the Welfare Queen: How Classism Has Worked Against Black Women,” *For Harriet*, accessed May 8, 2016, <http://www.forharriet.com/2015/05/the-myth-of-welfare-queen-how-classism.html#axzz484zA4boH>.

⁸⁷ Dorothy E. Roberts, “The Value of Black Mothers’ Work” (1994). Faculty Scholarship. Paper 830. http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/830

women writers give black mother's agency over their lives, even in systems of oppression.

Based on the research highlighted in this literature review, it is evident that black women writers have not had a voice in constructing images of black motherhood. Although scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy Roberts investigate historical and contemporary depictions of black mothers, little research is dedicated to the specific contributions of black women writers. Most of the information provided focuses on black motherhood as a whole which unfortunately, places black mothers in a monolithic category. Consequently, this research demonstrates that black women writers offer a unique and monumental declaration to black motherhood, ultimately, uncovering and identifying spiritual reconciliation as a form of Womanist leadership.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The researcher conducts a qualitative research study to investigate how southern black women writers construct black motherhood. Using content analysis, a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or biases, and a deductive approach (pre-identified categories), the researcher examines the maternal relationships in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.⁸⁸ In order to establish a data set for this study, the author uses the *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* to construct a list of Southern black women writers. Published in 2007, the *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* features 157 African-American women writers and chronologically, deems poetry as the first form of writing published by African-American women writers.

The aforementioned genre is composed of sixty-nine African-American women writers. In an effort to condense this list, the author chooses to focus on a specific region of the United States.

⁸⁸ Paul D. Leedy, Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, and University of Northern Colorado (Emerita), *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 142.

Being that the author has determined Africana-American women writers as the primary dataset, she consults to U.S. Census Bureau to determine the region of the United States with the largest population of African-Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, African-American populations are primarily concentrated in the southern United States.⁸⁹ The U.S. Census Bureau divides the South into the three regions.⁹⁰ These include the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central. Per this division, the South is comprised of Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.⁹¹

Of the sixty-nine aforementioned African-American Women Writers, thirty were born or raised in the South. In order to continue narrowing down the aforementioned list, the author conducted a search of the Library of Congress' online database. As the Library of Congress is the largest library in the world and oldest in the United States, the author used this database to locate anthologies or collective works on black motherhood. The author also conducted additional searches on three databases that were gathered as a result of random sampling. These include Google, Amazon, and the Robert W. Woodruff Library. Using the following terms, "Black motherhood" and "anthologies on Black motherhood" the following texts emerged, *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on*

⁸⁹ "2010 Census Shows Black Population has Highest Concentration in the South," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed December 8, 2015, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn185.html.

⁹⁰ "Census Regions and Divisions of the United States," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed December 8, 2015, http://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Motherhood, Reconceiving Motherhood, Revolutionary Mothering, Black Motherhood: Contexts, Contours, and Considerations, and Double stitch : Black Women Write About Mothers & Daughters. Of the aforementioned list, only *Double stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers & Daughters* and *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood* feature one or more of the southern black women writers determined by the *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*. After cross referencing these texts, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker are the only two African American Women Writers featured in all three.

To date, Maya Angelou has authored thirty-five books and Alice Walker has authored thirty- seven. As the author is focusing on maternal relationships, the author established a list of key words (mom, mother, mama, mommy, ma, mamma) to determine the books that will be examined. Specific to the Angelou collection, the researcher also adds Grandmother and Grandma to the list of keywords, as throughout Angelou's biographies, Angelou uses Momma and Grandmother interchangeably, especially in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The researcher searched these words in the collective titles of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. In order to examine these works, the author uses Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Standpoint Theory which offers predetermined and precisely defined characteristics of black Motherhood. Collins's standpoint theory allows for the inclusion of first-person narratives in theoretical analyses. Collins standpoint theory also considers interlocking systems of oppressions and their influences on marginalized groups, specifically black women. Black Feminist Standpoint Theory allows Angelou and Walker to illuminate their maternal relationships

with Vivian Baxter Johnson and Minnie Lou Grant from a distinctive point of view. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies five reoccurring themes in black motherhood. These include women-centered child care networks, providing economic support, community other mothers/social activism, socialization of daughters, and motherhood as a symbol of power. Using Collins pre-identified characteristics of black Motherhood, the researcher analyzes the prevalence of these themes in the maternal relationships characterized in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. By extracting the experiences of Annie Henderson and Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant as mothers and as transcribed by Walker and Angelou, the author investigates how southern black women writers construct black motherhood.

Data Collection

The researcher uses content analysis, a multi method methodology, to obtain and analyze this dataset. In order to determine the texts that will be used in this study, the author uses Google books to conduct a word search in the collective autobiographies and memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. The author searches for the following words: mom, momma, mother, mommy, ma, and mama. Based on this search, the researcher constructs a list of all the titles and the frequency of the aforementioned words. The author chooses the top book from each author. Initially, the data yields, *Mom & Me & Mom* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. After reviewing the aforementioned text, the researcher discovers that Angelou's *Mom & Me & Mom* chronicles her life in San Francisco, California not Stamps, Arkansas. By the time Angelou moves to San Francisco with Vivian Baxter, her biological mother, Angelou is

thirteen, and by the time she is sixteen, Angelou indicates that she has already been raised. Therefore, most of Angelou's upbringing is facilitated by Grandmother Henderson. This factor eliminated *Mom & Me & Mom* from the initial dataset.

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of material. For the purpose of this study, relational analysis, a method of content analysis, is used to examine the relationships among Collin's pre-identified themes of motherhood. The researcher conducts a relational analysis by creating a chart with the following columns: category, definition, examples, and in coding rules. Using a deductive category application, the researcher inserts Collins prior theoretical themes into a chart. In this chart, the researcher thoroughly defines Collin's pre-identified themes, cites examples from the text, and lists the coding rules. As part of the coding rules, the researcher suggests that each experience most directly relate to Collin's themes via verbiage. Outliers to Collin's pre-identified themes are placed in a separate chart that defines additional themes and provides specific examples.

Black Feminist Content Analysis

With training in qualitative methods, the researcher conducts a black feminist textual analysis of the maternal relationships presented in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. The conceptual framework for this study is informed by feminist research methods. According to *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, feminist research methodology offers an overall approach that is not limited to one specific method or epistemological position; rather it is a holistic approach that incorporates all states of the research process from the foundation of framing the research

questions through the write up of findings.⁹² Unlike traditional feminist content analysis, black feminist content analysis allows the researcher to look at the impact of race, class, and gender on black women's experiences with motherhood simultaneously.

This study uses black feminist textual analysis to examine how systemic oppression impacts southern black women writers' construction of motherhood. Embedded in black feminist textual analysis is Patricia Hill Collins's black feminist epistemology. Collins defines black feminist epistemology by four characteristics. These characteristics include lived experiences, use of dialog, ethics of caring, and personal accountability. These characteristics allow the researcher to distinguish specific experiences (black feminist content) that shape how Angelou and Walker perceive motherhood. In this context, the researcher defines black feminist content using the following components: consciousness of race, class, and gender issues, power imbalances as the result of the aforementioned oppression, and the frequency of the impact of these imbalances. By examining the prevalence of power imbalances in the aforementioned text, the researcher is able to identify how southern black women writers construct motherhood.

Using the census' regional divisions, the author is able to conclude that the southern United States houses the largest populations of black women. This data suggests that the South's long standing reliance on enslavement restricted the movement of African-Americans, specifically African-American mothers. The author contends that

⁹² Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed., *Feminist Research Practice: a Primer*, 2 ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2013), 384.

black mothers were less likely than their male counterparts to voluntarily leave plantations without their children. Also, in fear of being caught, raped, and/or killed, black mothers who were pregnant or had an infant were less likely to run. Additionally, partus sequitur ventrem (the child follows the mother) further restricted the movement of African-American mothers. Under partus sequitur ventrem, by virtue of birth, children of enslaved mothers inherited the mother's enslavement status. Consequently, partus sequitur ventrem protected white slave owners, supported the rape of black women, and ensured that the South maintained a self-sustaining enslavement population and a flourishing economy.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, the remnants of enslavement, and a post-war America continued to restrict the movement of black mothers in the South. Although many black mothers were accustomed to poverty and meager resources, acquiring housing and food after the Civil War, exasperated these conditions. Despite being relieved of bondage, many families stayed in the South and worked as sharecroppers. Without material inheritances, formal education, and wealth, many black families were forced to stay in the South. Segregation laws and systematic racism ensured that black families, especially black mothers, did not have the resources to improve their conditions. One hundred and fifty-one years after the Civil War, black mothers in the South continue to be disproportionately impacted by poverty than their white counterparts.

In *Unequal Lives: The State of black Women and Families in the Rural South*, the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative for Economic and Social Justice conducts an analysis of the economic security, health, and overall wellbeing of women living in

Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The Southern Black Women's Initiative's report focuses on nine counties in the aforementioned states because these are the locations that are persistently poor, as defined by the United States Department of Justice. In the selected counties, at least 20% of the population has lived in poverty for five consecutive census years. This report focuses on a variety of factors but poverty, single motherhood, and education take primacy. Key findings of this report include:

- The poverty rate for households headed by single, Black mothers in the rural counties studied is three times higher than households headed by white women with children, at 61 percent and 20.6 percent respectively
- In the counties studied, Black women experienced high levels of poverty and economic vulnerability
- The ability to obtain secure full time employment is a significant hurdle for Black women in the rural South
- Black women are 3.2 times more likely to die due to pregnancy and childbirth than white women

The aforementioned report highlights some of the factors that continue to keep black mothers restricted to certain areas, specifically the rural South. Although Maya Angelou is raised in Arkansas, her upbringing as well as Alice Walkers, occur in the rural South. Both Annie Henderson (Angelou's Grandmother) and Minnie Tallulah Grant (Walker's mother) were born and raised in the South. In later novels, Walker mentions a church cemetery located in Georgia where many of her family members have been laid to rest. Walker's admission suggests that many generations of southern black families have lived and died in the South. The author concludes that although there are numerous reasons that may have kept families in the South, it is undeniable the poverty and parenthood were key components.

CHAPTER IV

DATA

Maya Angelou and Alice Walker characterize their maternal relationships in relation to their southern heritage. Angelou, raised in Stamps, Arkansas, and Alice Walker, raised in *Eatonton*, Georgia pay careful attention to the rural surroundings that largely shape their maternal experiences. Although Angelou and Walker are sixteen years apart and at the time of their upbringings do not share the same socioeconomic status, both Angelou and Walker acknowledge the richness and the shortcomings of the South. In this chapter, the author demonstrates how Patricia Hill Collin's pre-identified themes of black motherhood manifest in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. These include women-centered child care networks, providing economic support, community other mothers, socialization of daughters, and motherhood as a symbol of power.

Southern Black Women Writers

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings introduces Maya Angelou as a southern black girl looking for a place to call home. Angelou writes, "The black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of power.

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence.”⁹³ Angelou’s statements speak to the miserable social conditions that black mothers are forced to socialize their daughters to endure. In *Stamps*, Angelou is brought up by her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Contrary to the impoverished childhood of Alice Walker, Angelou is raised black middle class. Ms. Henderson (known to Angelou as Momma) owns a country store, several acres of land, and is established in her community. When Angelou enters Ms. Henderson’s life, Ms. Henderson’s days of share cropping and working outside the home are over. Even so, Angelou observes the customers in which Ms. Henderson serves, noting, “Our people had lived off the land and counted on cotton picking and hoeing and chopping seasons to bring in the cash needed to buy shoes, clothes, books, and light farm equipment.”⁹⁴ Although Angelou does not grow up impoverished, Angelou recognizes that the southern geography contributes to the community around her.

Despite the racism, poverty, and sexism that runs rancid in the South, Angelou acknowledges that many people often return. Angelou writes, “They return to the South to find or make places for themselves in the land of their fore parents. They make friends under the shade of trees their ancestors left decades earlier. Many find themselves happy, without being able to explain the emotion. I think it is simply that they feel generally

⁹³ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

important...no one can claim that the South is petty of indifferent.”⁹⁵ In the aforementioned excerpt, Angelou suggests that her southern heritage plays a significant role in the woman she becomes.

On the other hand, Walker, born to Minnie Tallulah Grant and Willie *Lee* Walker, is the youngest of eight children. In the segregated South, both Ms. Grant and Mr. Walker are forced to work outside the home. Mr. Walker works as a share cropper and Ms. Grant works as a domestic worker. Growing up, Walker recalls that her mother’s day started before the sun rose and ended long after the sun had set. In the Walker home, Ms. Grant raised the girls and Mr. Walker was raised the boys. As Walker matriculates through adolescence, Walker begins to question the aforementioned style of parenting.

Walker writes, “I desperately needed my father and brothers to give me male models I could respect, because white men-whether in films or in person-offered man as a dominator, as killer, and always a hypocrite. My father failed because he copied the hypocrisy. And my brothers-except for one-never understood they must represent half the world to me, as I must represent the other half to them.”⁹⁶ Walker’s analysis of her father’s parenting speaks to specific patriarchal experiences of the South. Black men’s consistent subjugation and historical attacks on masculinity by white men often resonate in the consciousness of black men. Consequently, black men become perpetrators of the same oppression that plagued them.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Alice Walker, “Brothers and Sisters,” in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 331.

In Walker's reflection of the South's influence on her upbringing, Walker writes, "I am simply saying that southern black writers, like most writers, have a heritage of love and hate, but that they also have enormous richness and beauty to draw from. No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than the bequeathed to the black writer in the South; a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice."⁹⁷ Despite growing up in the racist and impoverished South, Walker acknowledges that her southern heritage largely shapes her constructions as a writer.

Symbols of Power

In the maternal relationships characterized by Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, motherhood is constructed as a symbol of power. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker calls for models who embody art, behavior, spiritual growth, and intellect. Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant use these characteristics to enlarge Angelou and Walker's perception of black womanhood. Despite their rural upbringings and encounters with racism and poverty, both Angelou and Walker see their caretakers as queens. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Annie Henderson uses motherhood as a symbol of power to influence the behaviors of Angelou. According to Angelou, if she was misbehaving, Grandmother Henderson could look at her and Maya would cease any wrong doing.

When Angelou reflects on Grandmother Henderson, she notes, "People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman and some, who remembered her youth, said she used

⁹⁷ Alice Walker, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 21.

to be right pretty. I only saw her power and strength.”⁹⁸ On another occasion, Angelou recalls Stamps’ former sheriff alerting Grandmother Henderson that the “boys” would be looking for a black man who had allegedly violated a white woman. Using years of wisdom, Grandmother Henderson hid Uncle Willie in a crate that she covered with vegetables. On the occasions that Angelou witnesses Annie Henderson harness her power, Angelou witnesses Grandma Henderson “command the spirits.”⁹⁹ In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker recalls her mother’s ability to cover the holes of the family’s home with flowers. Despite growing up in extreme poverty, Walker’s mother is able create absolute beauty. Mama Walker’s ability to use the limited resources she had to change the trajectory of her children’s lives illustrates the power posited in black motherhood.

Mothers as Providers

Collins identifies providing as a central part of mothering in the African-American community. Collins writes, “Whether they wanted to or no, the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female “occupation.”¹⁰⁰ In Collins’s discussion of providing as a part of mothering, Collins suggest that providing for black children's physical survival and attending to their emotional needs are interdependent dimensions.

⁹⁸ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 46.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother Daughter Relationships,” in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 42-60.

Annie Henderson and Minnie Grants experiences as mothers under depression is transmitted to Angelou and Walker. Both women are introduced to over exertion and both, glorify their caretakers who partake in it.

Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou emphasizes Annie Henderson's work ethic and the many tasks she performs to obtain economic support for her family. Unlike Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood that privilege stay at home mothers, black women have never had this luxury. In fact, according to bell hooks, "motherhood and child-rearing are not the locus of black women's oppression. From slavery to the present day, black women in the U.S. have always worked outside the home, in the fields, in the factories, in the laundries, in the homes of others."¹⁰¹ At some point in her life, Annie Henderson has performed all of these duties, sometimes simultaneously. In order to keep costs down, Ms. Henderson makes clothes for the entire family. For ten years, Angelou watches Ms. Henderson wake up at 4:00 am to start her day. Every morning, Ms. Henderson prepares meat pies, lemonade, and opens her store to local workers. Angelou writes, "Early in the century, Momma (we soon stopped calling her grandmother) sold lunches to the sawmen in the lumberyard and the seedmen at the cotton gin...during the picking season my grandmother would get out of bed at four o'clock (she never used an alarm clock)."¹⁰² Angelou's observation of her grandmother's work ethic fosters an equivocal work ethic in herself.

¹⁰¹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, 3 ed. (Boston: Routledge, 2014), 133.

¹⁰² Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 7-8.

Along with waking up at 4:00 am with her grandmother, Angelou attends school, assists with store operations, and performs domestic duties around the house. Angelou writes, “Throwing scoops of corn to the chickens and mixing sour dry mash with leftover food and oily dish water for the hogs were among our evening chores.”¹⁰³ Even in adolescence, Angelou learns how to obtain and maintain economic support for her family. At age ten, Ms. Henderson sends Angelou to finishing school. For Angelou, finishing school occurs in the home of Viola Cullinan, a white woman who hires Angelou as a maid. Here, Angelou is expected to learn remaining domestic duties. In Ms. Cullinan’s home, Angelou serves meals, assists with laundry, and runs errands. In addition to caring for Angelou and her brother, Bailey, Angelou witnesses Ms. Henderson care for Willie, Angelou’s uncle who was crippled as a child. During the ten years that Angelou resides with Ms. Henderson, Angelou observes Ms. Henderson’s unwavering work ethic and ultimately, Ms. Henderson instills an equivocal work ethic in Angelou.

Similar to Angelou, Walker recalls her mother’s relentless pursuit of economic support for her family. Working as sharecroppers during the Great Depression, Walker recalls her mother working a number of odd jobs to further support the family. In the South, sharecropping is a system where the landlord allows a tenant to use the land in exchange for housing and food.¹⁰⁴ After the Civil War, many black families rented land

¹⁰³ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 15.

¹⁰⁴ “Slavery by Another Name,” PBS, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/sharecropping/>.

from white owners and raised cash crops such as cotton, tobacco, and rice.¹⁰⁵ For the Walker family, sharecropping is slavery by another name. According to Ms. Grant, the Walker family rarely received compensation for their services and were often shorted on their share of the crop.

Despite growing up in poverty, Walker recalls her mother “pinching pennies” to purchase a television. Although Walker acknowledges that Ms. Grant purchased the television for personal satisfaction, Walker recalls that this enables her to see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. Years later, Walker would march behind his casket and interview Coretta Scott King. According to Walker, “Mother raised eight children and half a dozen of the neighbors without complaint.”¹⁰⁶ Walker suggests that Ms. Grant plays a significant role in the upbringing of fourteen youth. Walker continues,

She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds. During the “working” day, she labored beside - not behind - my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night.¹⁰⁷

Walker’s recollection of her mother’s work ethic demonstrates the lasting influence that this had on Walker’s childhood. In the acknowledgments of *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker credits her mother for shaping her into the woman she is today. At seventy-two, Walker has authored thirty-seven books, suggesting that Ms. Grant instilled an equivocal work ethic in her children.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Alice Walker, “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 122.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 2.

Socialization

In “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother Daughter Relationships,” Collins asserts that black mothers socialize their daughters to survive and endure systemic oppression. In *From Black mothers to daughters: Passing on narratives of surviving and thriving in the United States*, Lisa Bibuld conducts a qualitative study to examine the transfer of knowledge between black mothers and their daughters. Bibuld affirms that black families value community networks, educational pursuits, and spiritual supports. These relationships are present throughout the lives of Angelou and Walker. Similar to Collins, Bibuld also argues that black mothers socialize their daughters to survive systems of oppressions. Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant, socialize their daughters to survive the rural South.

Both Angelou and Walker are expected to work and pursue education so they can support themselves and their families. Angelou recalls the pressure of learning her time tables, writing, “We learned the time tables without understanding their grand premise...we had the capacity and no alternative.”¹⁰⁸ Angelou also recalls the threat of a switch if she did not recite them correctly. Routinely, Henderson and Grant develop their daughter's skills to combat oppression. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Annie recalls witnessing her grandmother deal with the disrespect and taunting of a group of white girls. Throughout the consistent disrespect and repetition of “Bye Annie, Bye Annie,” Angelou observes, “Momma never turned her head or unfolded her arms, but she

¹⁰⁸ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 10.

stopped singing and said, “Bye, Miz Helen, bye Miz Ruth.”¹⁰⁹ Despite being enraged, Angelou recalls her grandmother maintaining her composure, humming hymns, and remaining patient. Grandmother’s reluctance to respond to the disrespect teaches Angelou how to withstand systemic oppression in the rural South.

Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Ms. Henderson and Ms. Grant are strong disciplinarians. Angelou recalls Grandmother Henderson keeping a switch behind the door, in case of emergencies. Both Henderson and Grant remind their daughters that they do not have the same freedoms as their white counterparts. When Angelou’s brother, Bailey, stays out past his curfew, he is greeted with a beating upon his arrival home. When Maya and Bailey misbehave in church, they are taken to the church lobby and beaten. When Maya does not wash her feet to grandmother’s satisfaction, Maya is also beaten. Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya recalls numerous lessons that her grandmother instilled in her. First and foremost, Maya is expected to speak to everyone in the black community, even while passing. Maya is also expected to refer to her elders and peers using Mister, Miss, Auntie, Cousin, Unk, etc. Additionally, it is customary not to talk to white people and look in the mouth of grown people. Not only does Walker reference these same lessons, she specifically credits her upbringing, writing that she “owes clarity to parents who refused to diminish themselves as human beings by succumbing to racism.”¹¹⁰ Consequently, both women produce daughters who are assertive and self-reliant.

¹⁰⁹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 32.

Black Magic and Spirituality

Angelou and Walker's maternal relationships contribute two outliers to the five themes identified by Patricia Hill Collins. Collins lists women-centered child care networks, providing economic support, community other mothers/social activism, socialization of daughters, and motherhood as a symbol of power as reoccurring themes in black motherhood. However, Angelou and Walker engage spirituality and black magic in their constructions of motherhood. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou repeatedly references Annie Henderson's spirituality. Every morning Ms. Henderson recites the following prayer,

Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.¹¹¹

Annie Henderson's religious and spiritual beliefs largely define the behaviors she models for Angelou and her brother, Bailey. Throughout Angelou's life, Ms. Henderson uses religious principles as guiding laws. In Angelou's autobiography, "Thou shall not be dirty" and "Thou shall not be impudent" were two commandments that hung Ms. Henderson's total salvation. Angelou writes, "Momma was famous for pulling the quilts off after we had fallen asleep to examine our feet. If they weren't clean enough for her, she took the switch and woke up the offender with a few aptly placed burning

¹¹⁰ Alice Walker, "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 19.

¹¹¹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 7-8.

reminders.”¹¹² In addition to the guiding laws, Grandmother Henderson also demanded that her family attend church every Sunday. While Angelou was in church, she was expected to participate and remain pious. On the occasions that she does not, Angelou is whipped in the church lobby or when she returns home. According to Grandmother Henderson, “raise a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it.”¹¹³ For Annie Henderson, work, duty, and religion outlines the way in which she raises her children.

Similar to Annie Henderson, Minnie Grant used many of the same religious principles to raise her children. According to Walker, for Ms. Grant, life had no fences EXCEPT religious ones.¹¹⁴ Throughout her childhood, Walker is required to attend church on a weekly basis and the majority of Walker’s family is buried in the church cemetery. In *In and Out of Our Right Minds: The Mental Health of African American Women*, Karen Lincoln and Linda Chatters present empirical findings on the role of religion in the mental well-being of African-American women.¹¹⁵ According to Lincoln and Chatters, religious involvement is important in shaping behavioral patterns and lifestyles in ways that may prevent or reduce the risk of experiencing certain stressors.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Ibid., 26.

¹¹³ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 122.

¹¹⁴ Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), 43.

¹¹⁵ Karen Lincoln and Linda Chatters, eds., “Keeping the Faith: Religion, Stress, and Psychological Well-Being Among African American Women,” in *In and Out of Our Right Minds: the Mental Health of African American Women*, ed. Diane Brown and Verna Keith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 223-41.

Rather than focus on the unfairness of the racism and poverty that is rancid in the South, Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant use their religion to navigate these systems successfully. For Henderson and Grant, success equals survival and rearing of their children/grand children into adulthood. Religion also offers a coherent and meaningful framework that helps to interpret and manage problematic solutions.¹¹⁷ By using religion as a guiding principle, Grandmother Henderson and Mother Grant are able to navigate the harsh realities of the South. This study also suggests that religion may be important to generating relatively high levels of social resources that act to buffer the impact of stressful events.¹¹⁸ As seen in the lives of Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant, religion acts as a buffer from racism and poverty.

Another outlier that is not explored by Collins's construction of black motherhood is the belief in black magic. Contrary to the negative connotations associated with black magic, a term used interchangeably with voodoo, the author suggests that black mothers trust in black magic or voodoo to administer justice. As an observer of Voodoo, Zora Neale Hurston establishes voodoo as ritual. According to Hurston, "Voodoo is a religion of creation and life. It worships the sun, the water, and other natural forces."¹¹⁹ In the

¹¹⁶ Karen Lincoln and Linda Chatters, eds., "Keeping the Faith: Religion, Stress, and Psychological Well-Being Among African American Women," in *In and Out of Our Right Minds: the Mental Health of African American Women*, ed. Diane Brown and Verna Keith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 223-41.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Wendy Dutton, "The Problem of Invisibility: Voodoo and Zora Neale Hurston," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 2 (1993): 135, accessed September 12, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy2.usc.edu/stable/pdf/3346733.pdf>.

memoirs of Angelou and Walker, it is evident that Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant believe in a natural order. In the lives of Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant, black magic reflects a heightened level of intellect, wisdom, and divinity that black women possess. Even in situations that warrant anger, fear, and revenge, Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant remain firm in their beliefs.

Rather than seeking revenge or sending bad wishes into the universe, Ms. Henderson and Ms. Grant trust that the universe will work itself out. In the face of wrongdoing, both Ms. Henderson and Ms. Grant find humane ways to move on. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou acquires a toothache. Ms. Henderson informs Angelou that Dr. Lincoln, a white dentist, owes her a favor. When Angelou and Grandmother Henderson arrives, Dr. Lincoln refuses to see Angelou. Ms. Henderson recognizes that Angelou is having severe pain and that she cannot leave Angelou untreated. Ms. Henderson sends Angelou outside and goes in to speak with Dr. Lincoln privately.

Walker also recalls various occasions when she witnesses Ms. Grant exercise black magic. Walker specifically remembers a story that Ms. Grant use to tell her. During the Depression, Ms. Grant attempted to go into town to apply for government surplus food at the commissary. As a result of her appearance, Ms. Grant was humiliated and turned down by the white woman in charge. Later, Ms. Grant told Walker she lived to see this same white woman grow old and senile and so badly crippled that she had to get about on two sticks.

The aforementioned themes are reoccurring in Angelou and Walker's maternal relationships. However, while Annie Henderson and Minnie Grant do function as community other mothers and participate in women-centered child care networks,

Angelou and Walker do not cover this extensively. As far as the reader knows, in their respective communities, Sister Henderson and Sister Grant are church mothers. After the death of Mrs. Taylor in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Mr. Taylor shows up at the home of Annie Henderson. Ms. Henderson invites him in for dinner and informs him that he does not have to sit in his home alone. When Mr. Taylor begins talking about his wife, Ms. Henderson patiently listens and then suggests that Mr. Taylor take in a group of siblings. When Bailey's first girlfriends runs away, Ms. Henderson comforts her aunt. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* Walker specifically credits Ms. Grant for raising half of their neighbor's children without complaint. In Walker's community, Walker also recalls residents coming together to assist with funeral services and births. While the aforementioned themes are present, they are not the most prevalent.

In this chapter, the author demonstrates how Patricia Hill Collin's pre-identified themes of black motherhood manifest in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Most notably, in both works, motherhood functions as a site of power. Throughout their lives, Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant assume active roles in their households, communities, and churches. Essentially, the lives of Henderson and Grant consist of hard labor, over exertion, and unwavering commitments to their families. As Angelou and Walker transition to adulthood, both authors come to understand their caregiver's sacrifices and the significance of their work. Whether it is domestic, moral, or familial work, southern black mothers strive to instill the same work ethic in their children.

Patricia Hill Collins refers to the aforementioned as a motherwork. Collins defines mother work as black women's participation in a constellation of mothering activities. In

motherwork, black mothers work to create influence, authority, and power.¹²⁰ Black mothers are not socializing their children to be complacent with oppression. Black mothers are socializing their children to confront, out-wit, and thrive in oppression. Per Martha Pitts, “As a tool for resistance and social justice, motherwork and other mothering provides a mechanism for the survival of black women and the survival of the communities because it is an active effort to confront oppression with the goal of advancing the concerns of black women, children, and men.”¹²¹ The aforementioned statement is monumental to how we understand black motherhood. In summation, by engaging in the very nurturing of black youth, black mothers empower black youth to seize agency over their lives. By watching their mothers survive, endure, and challenge systematic oppression, black youth are given the resources and freedoms to create and define their own experiences.

¹²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 209.

¹²¹ Martha Pitts, “Nineteenth-Century Motherwork: Ideology, Experience, and Agency in Autobiographical Narratives by Black Women,” in *Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood*, ed. Kaila Adia Story (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014), 157.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the black church serves as the backbone of the black community. In the South, black women are the backbone of the black church. In Angelou and Walker's respective memoirs, the church shapes the mothers Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant become. Before Henderson and Grant accepts roles as mothers and other mothers, both women serve as church mothers. It is through their roles as church mothers that the aforementioned southern black women create and transmit cultural laws of leadership to their daughters. Consequently, religion and spirituality largely influences black mother-daughter relationships. Anna Julia Cooper writes, "The earnest well trained Christian young woman, as a teacher, as a homemaker, as wife, mother, or silent influence even, is as potent a missionary agency among our people as is the theologian; and I claim that at the present stage of our development in the South she is even more important and necessary."¹²²Aligning with Cooper's assertion, the author argues that the

¹²² Anna Julia Cooper. "Higher Education of Women." In *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including a Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, edited by Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, 87. Lanham, MD:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998.

training which enables black women to establish motherhood as a leadership role originates from black women's roles as church mothers. The author defines church mothers as black women who act as caregivers of the black church and as church mothers, black women organize celebrations, facilitate fundraising, teach Sunday school, provide childcare, prepare meals, perform domestic duties, and enforce religious principles. According to Fannie Barrier Williams, a founding member and leader of the National Association of Colored Women, "...churches have been and still are the great preparatory schools in which the primary lessons of social order, mutual trustfulness, and united effort have been taught."¹²³ By serving as church mothers of the black church, southern black women acquire leadership traits that inevitably develop black motherhood as a leadership role.

Black Mothers as Leaders

The black church defines growth and development in three stages. These stages include having a child, raising a child, and becoming a grandparent.¹²⁴ Along with growth and development, Toinette Eugene contends that the black church has unique spiritual practices. Per Eugene, these practices are the articulation of suffering, the location of persecutors, the provision of asylum for "acting out", and the validation of experiences.¹²⁵ Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant's experiences with the

¹²³ Cornel West et al., *African American Religious Thought: an Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 201.

¹²⁴ Jane W. Peterson "Age of wisdom: Elderly Black women in family and church." *The cultural context of aging: Worldwide perspectives* 2 (1990).

¹²⁵ Toinette M. Eugene "There is a balm in Gilead: Black women and the Black church as agents of a therapeutic community." *Women & Therapy* 16, no. 2-3 (1995): 57

aforementioned stages and practices establish endurance and creativity as leadership traits.

In the context of black motherhood, the author defines endurance as the physical, emotional, and mental capacity to withstand systems of oppression intended to eradicate. For Annie Henderson, who raised Angelou during the Great Depression, endurance means withstanding starvation, avoiding lynching's, and maintaining Henderson's general store. Angelou recalls Mr. Steward, a former sheriff, issuing Grandmother Henderson a warning. Mr. Steward advises, "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later."¹²⁶ Years later, Angelou can still recall Grandmother Henderson's immediate response. Angelou writes,

We were told to take the potatoes and onions out of their bins and knock out the dividing walls that kept them apart. Then with a tedious and fearful slowness Uncle Willie gave me his rubber-tipped cane and bent down to get into the now-enlarged empty bin. It took forever before he lay down flat, and then we covered him with potatoes and onions, layer upon layer, like a casserole. Grandmother knelt praying in the darkened store.¹²⁷

For southern black mothers, ensuring the survival of their youth in spite of systemic oppression is an act of endurance and even in unfathomable terror, Grandmother Henderson gets on her knees and prays. This demonstrates the precedence that religion

¹²⁶ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 18.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

and family takes in the lives of black mothers. Throughout Angelou's childhood, Grandmother Henderson bridges motherhood and religion. For Henderson, motherhood does not exist without religion. In fact, Henderson is able to mother and other mother because of religion, as her involvement in the church ensures that Henderson reaches an age of wisdom.

Peterson asserts, "Age does not measure years on a fixed continuum but reflects those important life events which mature a person."¹²⁸ Prior to assuming care of Angelou, Grandmother Henderson had been married three times and independently raised two sons. It is because of these experiences and the perseverance through these experiences that Henderson is able exemplify motherhood as a leadership role.

For Grandmother Henderson, the church functions as a place to exhibit power and exercise leadership skills. Growing up, Angelou recalls Grandmother Henderson being called upon each Sunday to lead a hymn. Angelou writes,

Week after week and year after year the performance never changed, yet I don't remember anyone's ever remarking on her sincerity or readiness to sing. Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life that she and her generation and all the Negroes before had found, and found to be safe ones.¹²⁹

Here, both Henderson's children and grandchildren see her power and strength. Although church mothers are restricted from delivering sermons, black women still perform crucial roles in the black church. For Grandmother Henderson, being

¹²⁸ Jane W. Peterson "Age of wisdom: Elderly Black women in family and church." *The cultural context of aging: Worldwide perspectives 2* (1990), 10.

¹²⁹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Reissue ed. (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2009), 47.

continuously selected by the pastor to lead the congregation in song elevates

Grandmother Henderson to a particular status. This is a status that follows Grandmother Henderson in the community.

Another leadership trait that black women acquire as church mothers is creativity. The author defines creativity as the ability to produce and reproduce using whatever resources are available. Angelou recalls the creativity that enabled the Henderson family to survive the Great Depression. Angelou writes, “The Depression must have hit the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgiving. The country had been in the throes of the Depression for two years before the Negroes in Stamps knew it.”¹³⁰ During this time, the government distributed lard, flour, salt, powdered eggs, and powdered milk. Although Annie Henderson and her family were doing better than several members of the community, plummeting cotton prices still impacted her revenue. In order to keep the general store open and provide for the Henderson household, Grandmother Henderson had to figure out how to maintain her business. Granny Henderson did this by setting up a trade system. With Henderson’s system, families could trade their welfare provisions for store credit. Although Grandmother Henderson was not receiving welfare, the Henderson family ate powdered eggs and milk. Grandmother Henderson’s creativity is the reason that the Henderson family is able to survive the Great Depression. Prior to the Great Depression, Angelou recalls the missionary ladies of Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helping Grandmother Henderson prepare pork for sausages. Unlike their white

¹³⁰ Ibid., 50.

counterparts who had access to slaughter houses or butcher services, black women had to extract and ground meat on independently. Generally, missionary women perform this task as a collective. As a result, families were able to preserve food and live off this food throughout the year. Experiences such as the aforementioned enable Henderson to overcome the strains of the Great Depression.

Similar to Angelou, Walker recalls the creative love that Walker receives from her mother, Ms. Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant. Despite impoverished beginnings, Walker vividly describes Grants' garden and the influence it has on her childhood. Walker writes, "Whatever she planted grew as if by magic... Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms-sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...and on and on."¹³¹ Although Grant is unable to afford material luxuries, Grant uses the limited resources she has to turn "shabby houses" into adorned homes Walker refers to Ms. Minnie Tallulah Grant as, "...the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers." Throughout Walker's life, Walker uses these same sunflowers to cover the holes in her wall. Walker writes,

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible-except as creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.¹³²

¹³¹Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers Gardens*, 241.

¹³² Ibid.

In the aforementioned excerpt, Walker characterizes Ms. Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant as a creator. Grant's duality as a mother and artist shapes southern black motherhood as leadership role because Grant's expression of love enables Walker to find her own garden. Grant physically and metaphorically leads Walker toward her liberation.

As Collin's writes and Walker enforces, "There is no doubt that motherhood is for most African people symbolic of creativity and continuity."¹³³ In the context of southern black motherhood, the expression of love is symbolic of creativity and continuity. Therefore, southern black motherhood differs from traditional brands motherhood. Grants' garden is a metaphorical representation of the intrinsic values and morals that she instills in Walker. Although Grant does not have any formal education, the inherited knowledge that she passes to Walker demonstrates the significance of creativity in black women's lives. Karen Johnson's, "In Service for the Common Good: Anna Julia Cooper and Adult Education," implies that in the context of southern black motherhood as leadership role, black women are educators. Johnson writes, "From Cooper's perspective, it was crucial that the learning adult would take his or her knowledge and skills and in turn use these to improve the life chances of the other members of their community and overall society."¹³⁴ For Cooper, the transmission of black motherhood occurs through education but this education is not limited to the academy.

¹³³ Patricia Hill Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/daughter Relationships," *SAGE* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 4.

¹³⁴ Karen Johnson, "In Service for the Common Good': Anna Julia Cooper and Adult Education," *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 51.

Although Karen Johnson's article largely focuses on formal education, the night school that Cooper operated from her home suggests that a transmission of inherited and ancestral knowledge also occurs. It is no secret that education was a priority in Cooper's life. Even so, Cooper's admiration of her mother, whom had no formal education, and Cooper's adoption of her brother's children, tell us that formal education is not the only type of education Cooper values. Cooper did not birth any biological children but she reared five, as a single mother. In the context of black motherhood, black mothers are entrusted with transmitting inherited knowledge.

In Hopes of Healing: A Reconciliation

The memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker demonstrate that the black church plays a crucial role in the transference of leadership traits from mother to daughter. Even so, Angelou and Walker's respective memoirs do not detail the high personal cost that black mother-daughter relationships pay. Parvan Ghasemi and Rasool Hajizadeh assert, "...mothers are first and foremost human being with distant identities, individuals who can have the potential -in favorable circumstances-to realize that motherhood and individuality are not mutually exclusive."¹³⁵ Contrary to this assertion, in the memoirs of Angelou and Walker, Henderson and Grant were expected to be nothing less than "strong black mothers." As "strong black mothers," Henderson and Grant lived superhuman existences. In that existence, Henderson and Grant were self-less and self-sacrificing. The black church not only expected this demeanor, it demanded it.

¹³⁵ Parvin Ghasemi and Rasool Hajizadeh, "Demystifying the Myth of Motherhood: Toni Morrison's Revision of African-American Other," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2, no. 6 (November 2012): 477.

Women who did not identify as strong nurturers or fit mothers were considered outcast in the black community.

The problem with this assumption is that black women, particularly black mothers, are breaking all over the world. According to the University of Wisconsin, poverty, parenting, and discrimination put black women - particularly low income black women - at greater risk for major depressive disorder. Additionally, depression is treated at lower rates in the African-American community. According to Nia Hamm, a writer with the Huffington Post, “Because blacks, particularly black women, experience higher rates of depression than their white female or black male counterparts, but receive lower rates of treatment for depression — specifically adequate treatment — they remain one of the most undertreated groups for depression in the United States.”¹³⁶ This thesis calls for a reconciliation that acknowledges distant and domineering mothers as much it is acknowledges openly affectionate and physically present mothers. Gayles defines this reconciliation as an acknowledgement that there will always be a part of the black daughter that is inseparable from the black mother.¹³⁷

Both Angelou and Walker accept this acknowledgement and recognize that in the context of their lives, their mothers did the best they could. It is because of this reconciliation that Angelou and Walker are able to assign black motherhood as a leadership role. Brooks suggests that black mothers do and have always raised their

¹³⁶ Nia Hamm, “High Rates of Depression Among African-American Women, Low Rates of Treatment,” The Huffington Post, November 25, 2014, accessed July 17, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nia-hamm/depression-african-american-women_b_5836320.html.

¹³⁷ Gloria Wade Gayles, “The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction,” *SAGE* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 10.

daughters to survive in a society that actively seeks to destroy the minds and bodies of black women.¹³⁸ By raising women who are aware of this, black mothers give a particular advantage to their daughters. Becoming aware of Cooper's double consciousness in adolescence, black daughters are given the tools to define their existences. Contrary to the images portrayed in the media, black daughters learn how to live by watching how their mother's live. Black mothers function as leaders who physically and genetically mold their daughters. When black women writers articulate their experiences with motherhood, black Women liberate their mothers and foremothers, as they are no longer confined to superhuman existences.

Although Gayles asserts that we do not generally see the “truths of our mothers’ lives” in black women’s autobiographies, Dr. Maya Angelou’s autobiographical works elucidate the tumultuous relationship Angelou had with her mother, specifically in adolescence. When Angelou inquires why Johnson left her with Ms. Annie Henderson (paternal grandmother) for ten years, Johnson responds,

I would have been a terrible mother. I had no patience. Maya, when you were about two years old, you asked me for something. I was busy talking, so you hit my hand, and I slapped you off the porch without thinking. It didn’t mean I didn’t love you; it just meant I wasn’t ready to be a mother. I’m explaining, not apologizing. We would have all been sorry had I kept you.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ibid.,50.

¹³⁹ Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Mom* (New York: Random House, 2013), 24-25

Although Eurocentric paradigms of motherhood would condemn Johnson for dismissing domestic duties and child care responsibilities, Johnson demonstrates that the power of love extends past a physical presence. As a result of Johnson's love for Angelou, Johnson placed Angelou in the care of Ms. Annie Henderson, Angelou's paternal grandmother, with the utmost confidence that Ms. Henderson would love Angelou relentlessly. Johnson's confession elucidates a mother's love that is different from traditional paradigms.

As a single mother in the 1930's, Johnson did not have the resources, patience, or desire to raise two children. By acting in the best interest of Angelou and simultaneously, prioritizing needs for personal development, Johnson exemplifies southern motherhood as a leadership role. Johnson's decision to delay parenting enables Johnson to be a better grandmother to Angelou's son than the mother she was to Angelou. When Johnson and Angelou are given the resources and time to grow, both women become better mothers, as Johnson is able to provide for Angelou financially and Angelou is able to offer stability to Guy. It is only after becoming a mother that Angelou is able to reconcile with her own mother. In adulthood, Angelou is able to both recognize and appreciate motherwork. Angelou writes,

You've been a hard worker, white, Black, Asian, and Latino women ship out of the San Francisco port because of you. You have been a shipfitter, a nurse, a real estate broker, and a barber. Many men--and if my memory serves me right—a few women risked their lives to love you. You were a terrible mother of small children, but there has never been anyone greater than you as a mother of young adult.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Mom* (New York: Random House, 2013), 196-197.

Angelou's reconciliation with her mother and the life that Vivian Baxter was able to give enables Angelou to truly understand the truth of her mother's life. Black women do not parent under the same conditions as their white counterparts. Vivian Baxter did the best she could with the resources she had. This reconciliation enables Angelou to see how Vivian's sacrifices ensure that Angelou has agency over her own life. These sacrifices, Vivian's motherwork, assign black motherhood as a leadership role.

Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* construct black motherhood as a leadership role. By establishing motherhood as a leadership role, Angelou and Walker disrupt the infiltration of white hegemonic ideals of motherhood in black women's psyches. Consequently, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker offer monumental contributions to black motherhood. By recording their life experiences with Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant, Angelou and Walker contextualize black motherhood in the South. By shaping black motherhood as a leadership role, Angelou and Walker aid black women and girls in reconciling the relationships with their mothers. Angelou and Walker write the stories that their mothers did not have the luxury or privilege to do. In doing so, Angelou and Walker illuminate the importance of mother work which is encompassing of both their presences and absences. In coming to this understanding, Walker writes, "I always understood her work was important. She had to be away from home in order for there to *be* a home. It was her earnings that meant food, clothes, a toothbrush. A roof over our heads. I dared not complain. And yet I missed her with every fiber of my being. I died

each day she was away. Yet I could say nothing.”¹⁴¹ Angelou and Walker offer an explanation and then a reconciliation for the isolation that a southern geography and economy forges between black mothers and their children.

The initial purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which southern black women writers construct motherhood. The findings from this study conclude that southern black women writers construct black motherhood in terms of Womanist leadership. Although there are various frameworks of Womanism, the leadership traits identified in this study most closely align with Alice Walker’s Womanism, first presented in, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden*. Walker’s tenets of Womanism accurately describes how southern black women writers construct black motherhood in terms of Womanist leadership. A Womanist is a black woman who is connected spiritually, emotionally, and physically to her people and the world around her.

Adhering to Walker’s definition, a Womanist, “Loves the Spirit. Loves the struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.”¹⁴² Expounding on Walker’s Womanism, the researcher finds that the memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker offer spiritual reconciliation as a form of Womanist leadership. The author defines spiritual reconciliation as a process of restoration in which black mothers and daughters allow healing to proceed hurt. Expounding further, the author finds that intergenerational

¹⁴¹ Alice Walker, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 34.

¹⁴² Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2003), xi.

trauma can impact black women's experiences with motherhood. Intergenerational trauma refers to traumatic experiences that are passed from generation to generation.

For Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, these experiences include sexual violence, loss, and systemic oppression. Collectively, these events impact the ways in which black women mother. In 2007, Rebecca Walker, Alice Walker's daughter released *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood After a Lifetime of Ambivalence*. In this autobiography, Rebecca Walker reveals feelings of detachment, anger, and hurt towards her mother. Per Rebecca, her mother saw participation in motherhood as a form of oppression. As we see in Walker's memoirs and ultimately her life, motherhood functions as a form of bondage. Despite a deep appreciation for Mama Grant, Walker thoroughly acknowledges what it means to mother black youth.

In the memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, Annie Henderson and Minnie Tallulah Grant are phenomenal black women. Black women who the researcher deems phenomenal because they do it all. However, it is not until Angelou and Walker become phenomenal black women that they understand the superhuman existences that black women live. At some point, black women learn to admire overexertion. Somewhere black women learn to overexert. They learn that they cannot break. They learn that they are not allowed to break. It does not matter if they are survivors of sexual violence. It didn't matter if they are living with a mental illness. It does not matter if they have to raise kids alone. Some other black woman, probably Grandma Henderson or Mama Grant is going to say that she knew he was not the one, that she hopes there was not an investment, and even in the midst of a break down, she is quickly going to remind you that black women do not do that and that there is no man in this world a black woman

needs. Although Grandma Henderson or Mama Grant may not say it, they mean husbands and fathers too. This is the black womanhood that Angelou and Walker embraced. This is the black womanhood that is demanded. However, the memoirs of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker contribute something else to this conversation; black women are breaking and they are breaking all over the world.

By examining the maternal relationships in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, the author concludes that while the black church aids in the transference of leadership traits from mother to daughter, the black church also places strains on the black mother-daughter relationship. As black women are not a monolithic entity, black mother-daughter relationships are not either. This study examined how southern black women writers perceive and experience black mother-daughter relationships. Future studies should examine why.

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