From mother to daughter: an analysis of intergenerational activism among African-American women from 1960 to 1961

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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FROM MOTHER TO DAUGHTER: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERGENERATIONAL
ACTIVISM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN FROM 1960 TO 1961.

Committee Chair: Josephine Bradley, Ph.D.

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This study examines whether or not the political behaviors of black women maternal figures in traditional or nontraditional political means, influence their daughter's future political activities. This research stems from the problem regarding the limited analysis of black mother-daughter relationships, the scholarship’s lack of analysis of how this relationship explains the origin of black women’s activism, and the limited definition of political activity, engagement, and efficacy for African-American women. Data for this research was gathered by utilizing the qualitative method of case studies and narrative analysis. Based on the data collected, the researcher found that while black women activists idolized their maternal figures, it varied whether they defined their maternal figures as activists. However, all of the participants highlighted certain tenants of black womanhood that were utilized for their physical survival as well as their survival as activists. While their maternal figures were an influence to their activism, their
childhood experiences in a geographic location led to their participation in the movement more than their maternal figures. Furthermore, African-American women engage in activism and politics through collective participation, grassroots organization, nonviolent protest, and community advocacy. The conclusion drawn from this research is whether maternal figures are essential for black women's activism. Based on this research, these maternal figures are partly influential to black women's activism by providing them an example of black womanhood as well as the tools necessary to facilitate their activism.
FROM MOTHER TO DAUGHTER: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVISM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN FROM 1960 TO 1961

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

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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ABBREVIATIONS

AUC    ATLANTA UNIVERSITY CENTER
CORE   CONGRESS OF RACIAL EQUALITY
COAHR  COMMITTEE ON APPEAL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
NAACP  NATIONAL ASSOCIATION ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
SCLC   SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
SNCC   STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether or not the political behaviors of black women maternal figures in traditional or nontraditional political means, influence their daughter's future political activities. In this research, political activity is defined as a visible, tangible method of political participation for the purpose of facilitating change within a particular community. Traditional political activities include those political actions defined and recognized by the American political system such as registering to vote, voting, and holding political office. Consequently, nontraditional political activities among black women can be defined as an alternative political action based on the historical realities of African-American women not within the realm of traditional politics, but still with the intent to facilitate social change in the community. These activities include, but are not limited to boycotts, sit-ins, church activities, caring for the elderly or other children in community, household responsibilities (cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and hosting) for organization, participation in the local school systems, voter registration drives, and/or participating in a social organization.

Black women's studies scholarship is largely devoted to analyzing how both racism and sexism impact the lives of Africana women. In fact, most activists discuss the role these two oppressing entities had in shaping their political consciousness and
actions. Patricia Hill Collins and Combahee River Collective (the Collective) are representative of black feminist scholars who thoroughly investigate how the lived experiences of Africana women reflect the connection between race and gender. Several black women scholars focus on the connection between racism, sexism, and classism. However, both Collins and the Collective conduct a thorough analysis of how Africana women’s experiences facilitate political activism. Their analysis highlights the origin of black women’s sociopolitical consciousness by describing how collective conscious is a result of individual racial and gender consciousness based on their personal lived experiences. Both scholars conclude how a direct relationship exists between self-identification and political activism. They infer how an awareness of self ultimately leads activist behavior, whether in traditional or nontraditional means, to facilitate change in their perspective communities. Thus, they both concur that external and internal processes are instrumental to personal and political journeys. Research provides evidence that family members form an individual’s notions and ways of being. In fact, the transmission of values is an integral component of the African cosmology.

Since the slave era, black families and communities have been the setting for the transmission of cultural and religious values, survival techniques and political indoctrination. It is the African belief that African elders educate children through messages designed to address basic situations that children will face throughout their lives. This idea of “passing down” is as a method to ensure the survival of the black


community. Black mothers were no exception to this principal. According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Black maternal figures aim to teach their daughters skills that will take them anywhere." \(^3\) Specifically, Collins highlights how these mothers transmit knowledge to their daughters as a survival tool. This method will be highlighted more specifically in the following chapter. African-American maternal figures do not only play the provider role for their daughters, but they also act in the role of a teacher. While the daughters receive their formal education within the classrooms, they obtain non-formal education from their maternal figures at home. Black motherhood is viewed as the foundational base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and as a catalyst for social activism.\(^4\) Black mothers active in the community are highly respected by their communities. Thus, black motherhood can be viewed as a symbol of power by African-American women engaged in Black women’s community work.\(^5\) This power is evident either within the home or within the larger community.

Black women’s political behavior is unique because of their strong involvement in both nontraditional and traditional methods of political involvement. Jewel Prestage acknowledges how their nontraditional political activities escalated their future traditional political activity.\(^6\) Whether in traditional or nontraditional means, the purpose of black women’s political activities is to uplift and help sustain their communities to ensure

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\(^4\) Ibid., 176.

\(^5\) Ibid., 192.

survival in America. According to Prestage, African-American women’s actions during and after Reconstruction can be appropriately labeled political because their nontraditional political actions were “designed to alter public policy provisions and legally condoned cultural practices defining their status and the behaviors mandated for that status.” Comparatively, according to Shirley J. Yee, nontraditional political efforts were also conducted by black women activists involved in abolitionist efforts. Yee infers that this was the first collective effort among black women activists. She claims black women activists were involved in the abolitionist movement in a wide range of activities such as organizing all-black antislavery societies, writing, speaking, petitioning, and participating in self-help projects in their own neighborhoods.

Assumptions

This research presents several assumptions. As stated earlier, family members mold our notions and ways of our being. The assumption that guides this research is that family members help develop our ideologies among various dimensions, which includes political ideologies. Biological mothers are part of this family unit. In the context of African-American culture, this also includes grandmothers, aunts, cousins as well as not blood related women figures. The second assumption in this research is the idea of internalization. Daughters internalized the experiences and ideologies of their mothers. Yet this internalization may have manifested once the daughters had the opportunity to participate in political activities. Finally, this research assumes that mothers have continuous interactions with their daughters. In order to have political, economic, or

7. Prestage, 90.
social influence over the daughter, one must assume that mothers spent a considerable amount of time with their daughters.

Furthermore, this research makes several assumptions regarding the traditional African-American method of “passing down.” In this analysis, “passing down” is defined as an older generation of people providing the newer generations with the tools they need to carry on their cultural values, social norms, and the tools need to ensure survive for the future generation. This definition is approached from an African centered perspective. This research views this as a cultural phenomenon that is specifically unique to African-American people. In order to include this idea of passing down, this research assumes that maternal figures are aware and actually participate in this behavior. Additionally, it must be noted that this research analyzes “passing down” as a separate entity than internalization.

Statement of the Problem

Many questions arise when analyzing black mother-daughter relationships and the link to the daughter’s political behaviors. The first question is whether black woman’s political behavior transcends generations. Research has shown that mothers have a higher influence on their daughter’s political ideologies than their fathers because of the mother’s frequent interaction with her children. The problem becomes adequately describing the ways black maternal figure’s political behavior transfer to the daughter. Specifically, the question becomes whether the daughter manifests these political

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behaviors throughout the course of their political activist careers. The scholarship should investigate whether this ultimately explains the origins of black women's political activism. Unfortunately, this is where the scholarship remains vague.

Research outlines how women's initial exposure to political issues or struggles plants the seed for later activism. Various African-American women activists describe this "seed" as witnessing and internalizing the experiences of their maternal figures. Several black women activists identified strong women role models who were influential in shaping their political beliefs. Activists viewed these women as the symbols of socioeconomic injustices as well as community leaders. Additionally, they often highlight their mother's political participation, whether through their church, nonprofit organization, or simply helping elders in their community. Womanist scholars often acknowledge their intellectual roots started by witnessing their mothers' daily acts of resistance and struggle. In this work, the daily resistance and struggle was in regards to how the triple oppression based on race, sex, and class affect the employment, education, and communities of women of color. However, they introduce this phenomenon as part of a larger study instead of an independent study by itself. Two great examples of African-American women activists who were highly influenced by their mother's political behavior are Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer. Historians Chana Lee, Barbara Ransby, and Joanne Grant all provide an analysis on how influential their mothers were upon their political involvement. Reading their biographies, the authors spent a

10 Neville and Hamer, 9.

considerable energy investigating the influence their mothers had upon their participation in civil rights activism. The biographers of both Baker and Hamer recognize how the identity of their mothers, along with their lived experiences, shaped their sociopolitical agenda. However, it is typically introduced as part of an analysis of their formative years that includes the father’s role, childhood experiences, and their family’s socioeconomic position.

Furthermore, mother-daughter relationships are analyzed from a European-Western perspective that ignores the distinctive relationship between black mother-daughter relationships. Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis cosign on this assessment by asserting that black families have been researched from a white, middle-class perspective instead of an African-centered one that encompasses the unique experiences of black people. Joseph and Lewis emphasize that this relationship is highlighted within the sociological analysis of the black family or in black literature. Even in this context, they are presented from the black male perspective. With that in mind, Joseph and Lewis stress how a theory about mother-daughter relationships among Blacks is incomplete without a consideration of racial relations and racism. Also, according to these scholars, the term “relationship” is misleading as it pertains to black mother and daughters. They claim that a typical analysis of the mother-daughter relationship is strictly on psychoanalytical, Freudian perspective that pertains to the daughter’s prescribed behavioral responses at specific development stages. In turn, these scholars do not incorporate the cultural relevance within this relationship. Thus, investigating black

mother-daughter relationships from a black women's studies perspective is lacking within the scholarship.

Another problem this research highlights is the limited definition of political activity, engagement, and efficacy. These factors have limited definitions, particularly as it relates to African-American women. Activism and political behavior in the dominate culture differs from that of African-American women. In many cases, political behavior and efficacy is viewed in a European-centered manner. According to the European cosmology, political behavior consists of a power play while efficacy indicates ones faith and trust in the American government, believing they can influence political affairs. The American practice of power politics involves using political power against the marginalized, even though the purpose of politics consists of assisting those at the margins as well as those in the center. 13 Consequently, African-American women approach political behavior and efficacy differently. African-American women's participation and belief in politics can be defined as "Afritics," which is an Africentric understanding of politics which places emphasis on the collective. The ultimate goal of their political behavior consists of uplifting their communities. In fact, their political efficacy incorporates almost a revolutionary perspective because their goal is to alter the American government structures to assist their communities. Yet, in a general context, the discussion of politics and political behavior is typically limited based on race, class, and gender. With that in mind, the problem is the lack of analysis of how African-American women participate in politics and activism.

More importantly, there remains a lack of analysis regarding the impact of nontraditional political behavior as it relates to African-American women. Prestage infers how the history of African-American women’s participation in American politics must be recognized not only for their involvement in traditional acts, but also in nontraditional activities engaged in long before obtaining the right to vote.\textsuperscript{14} In recent years, black women have become active participants in traditional forms of activism. Yet, even before the voting rights policies, black women remained a vital force in American politics in various nontraditional forms. However, black women’s political contributions are usually overshadowed because political behaviors among black women are not typically viewed as political or significant.

\textit{Rationale}

Black feminist scholars are often cited for highlighting the link between identity formation and activism. However, the scholarship does not extend any further than presenting the black feminist ideologies such as black feminism and Africana womanism that facilitate black women’s participation in activist activities. There remains a lack of scholarship devoted to highlighting tangible examples of this dialectic relationship manifested. Consequently, the Combahee River Collective statement contains a list of political activities that highlight the result of their increase in racial and gender consciousness. For example, they list various collective projects in the community related to sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape, and healthcare.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, typically, other scholars make assumptions about this relationship based on historical

\textsuperscript{14} Prestage, 89.

realities. With that in mind, this research focuses on highlighting how identity is actually manifested through the political actions of black women.

Many studies focus on the voting behavior of African-American people or how race affects the political ideologies of African-American people. Yet those studies are still limited to a particular generation. While the studies highlight the political behavior of African-American people based on the traditional forms of activism, their analysis is limited to a particular socioeconomic political environment in a specific generation. These studies are limited in their reflection of African-American political behavior. For example, their analysis may be based on black women’s reflection of Jesse Jackson’s presidential bid, Clarence Thomas sexual harassment suit, O.J. Simpson’s trial, or public policy questions regarding welfare, affirmative action, or abortion based on the realities of that generation. Moreover, political scientists and sociologists often neglect the impact maternal figures have on political activism. Rarely do they evaluate how intergenerational communication—whether verbal or nonverbal—impacts the daughter’s outlook on race, gender, and class. Even though there are several examples of various African-American women leaders who address the impact of this intergenerational communication between mother and daughter, this has not been a piece of research that has been adequately addressed. While this has remained a trend in many of the stories from African-American women activists, it has not been investigated as major research undertaking in the scholarship of black women’s studies.

This research is aimed at understanding the origin of black women’s involvement in political activities, such as activism and social movements. Political scientists, sociologists, and black feminist scholars can use this research as a means of
understanding the origin of black women’s activism. An investigation of this phenomenon of transmission should be conducted because African-American women have emerged as the prime users of traditional avenues of contemporary American politics. Specifically, focusing research on this marginalized group helps scholars understand the impact identity formation has upon black women’s political participation. The academic community must understand how battling racism and sexism causes African-American women to experience the world differently, which impacts their political ideologies more than those who are not black or female.

Additionally, this study could lead to raising awareness surrounding the origin of black women’s participation in various social movements such as the Atlanta University Center Student Movement. Black women have a long history of confronting various injustices by working collectively to transform society. Yet, many questions still remain regarding internal influences on black women’s activism. Group consciousness in social movements ultimately starts with how the individual interprets their personal life experiences. After all, simply being black and female does not automatically lead to an increase in consciousness. Usually the political realization African-American women experience as an individual transcends to a group consciousness as well. Yee explains that black women’s involvement in the abolitionist movement was due to the associations with other women to direct their own activism.

16. Prestage, 89.


18. Neville and Hamer, 6.
Black motherhood is often neglected as a vital political symbol. While Collins highlights how black motherhood is a symbol of power for the entire black community, she neglects to highlight what black motherhood represents for other black women, specifically their daughters. Questions arise in the scholarship related to black mother-daughter relationships, but inadequately focus on the angle of maternal figures influence. Mothers taught their daughters how to create and sustain communities, which soon became the foundation for their daughter’s development as community leaders.\textsuperscript{19} However, as stated earlier, it is only mentioned as a part of a larger research study. Yet, the journey of political consciousness among black women is a process of discovering the meaning of black womanhood, feminism, race, racism, sex, and sexism. Thus, as much as black women’s scholars investigate black women’s political place in society, it is imperative to take a closer look at the space African American mothers occupy and whether or not that has an influence on their daughters.

Moreover, in addition to black women’s studies discourse, this research provides a reflection on theories presented around what constitutes black womanhood and continuous African woman’s consciousness. More importantly, it highlights how voice throwing and “passing down” transcends location and generation gaps among African women within the Diaspora. While the black women presented in this research may not have resided on the African continent, they may have experienced similar oppressions along the lines of gender and race that suppressed their voice. This coincides with the idea of “voice throwing” presented by Mary Kolawale. According to Kolawale, throwing

one’s voice is one of the best things to have happened to African women in recent years. Thus, voice throwing becomes the medium in which African women throughout the Diaspora can recapture and maintain their black womanhood within a multiple oppression society. With that in mind, this research highlights whether the idea of “passing down” among African-American women may be their means of utilizing this “voice throwing” principal that maintains black woman’s consciousness.

According to Nancy Naples, scholars rarely focus on the interlocking and reinforcing connections between political activism, mothering, community work, and paid labor. While scholars incorporate these principals and activities as separate entities, they rarely analyze how all these parts interconnect when analyzing black women activists. Traditional academic practices separate these various factors by separating paid work from social reproduction, activism from mothering, and family from community. In fact, in the context of black women’s experiences, all of these factors influence one another. Because black women carry a dual sense of identity, an analysis of political behavior, motherhood, and activism may be slightly different from other marginalized groups.

Finally, this research provides the scholarship different means to examine ways racial oppression, class exploitation, and patriarchy intersects in the lives of African-American women as well as their perceptions of the impact these structures have upon them. While the scholarship evaluates the status of black women along the lines of race,

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class, and gender, rarely do we incorporate their responses to that multidimensional identity. In other words, institutionalized racism affects the ways African-American women view their place in society. Not only do they understand their place in society, the influences of these various forms of oppression leads to a different perception of themselves. It is necessary to examine the implications of racism, classism, and sexism in order to grasp a concrete set of social relations that influence their behavior. This study provides the opportunity to see whether or not the perceptions of self and behaviors are contained in one generation depending on the historical realities of that time or whether or not it transmits itself across generations.

*Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework included in this study is the forerunner's theory presented by Karl Mannheim. He investigates generational transmission among the older and younger generations. The theory highlights the impact of socialization between generations. These “generational units” contained values, behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that are developed during the formative years. The analysis, highlights how each generation does not carry a unique value system, but their ideologies are a carryover from the previous generation. He infers how the new generations are simply an extension of the older generation. Alan Spitzer explains how “we are more like our fathers than we like to think... the rebellious youth assumes in maturity the commitments and lifestyles of their predecessors.” 22 The theory of forerunners is utilized in the conceptual framework of this research because black mothers who are involved in political behavior,

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whether or not traditional or nontraditional, are forerunners for their communities. In other words, Mannheim’s research reveals that if the older generational unit were forerunners, then the newer generational set will hold on to their ideologies, becoming forerunners themselves. However, while this theory offers a basic foundation that needs to be investigated, Mannheim does not incorporate certain factors applicable to black mother-daughter relationships such as race and gender.

Karl Mannheim developed this theory in an attempt to explain how parental influences transfer to their offspring. In his essay, “The Problems of Generations,” Mannheim addresses how cultural consistency is maintained across generations while claiming that the “problem of generations” is that social and cultural science theories assume that every generation starts afresh from his own point of view. He examines the relationship between generation replacement and social change. In fact, he claims that new generations simply react to their historical realities differently than do older generations, which causes the potential for social change. Other social scientists claim that generations hold different values and ideologies based on what is happening historically at that particular time.

Mannheim refutes this analysis by claiming that socialization of the parents plays a major part in the behavior and attitudes of their offspring. He argues that not every new generation develops an original and distinctive consciousness that brings about social change. In other words, Mannheim infers that the behaviors of forerunners are not

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isolated to one generation, but transmitted beyond that generation. Older forerunners foreshadow and bring about change not only through social action, but also through the socialization of their children who are considered the next generation of adults.\(^{25}\) Thus, the forerunners are developed as a result of the influence from the older generation of forerunners. Ironically, younger generations tend to adapt themselves to the older generations.

Mannheim defines forerunners as a small number of individuals from the preceding generation who foreshadowed the trend in cultural change.\(^ {26}\) While these cultural ideologies are not original to members of this new generation, they simply respond to the changing society. In fact, the attitudes of the new generation is first evolved and practiced by older forerunners, which leads to one to draw the conclusion that the younger generations are influenced by the forerunners from the older generation. Moreover, Mannheim highlights the process in which individuals become forerunners. Of course, this is developed through the process of socialization during childhood and adolescence. He explains that “early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world.”\(^ {27}\) Therefore, the new generation has exposure to events, values, and behaviors in one’s formative years that are taken into their adulthood. This worldview developed during this time becomes the individuals original set of values while later experiences reiterate the true meaning of this set.

\(^{25}\) Myers and Booth, 19.

\(^{26}\) Myers and Booth, 19.

\(^{27}\) Mannheim, 282.
Scholars argue that Mannheim’s generation theory provides the theoretical foundation for social change. Under this theory, generations were conceptualized as one of the driving forces of social change and progression.\(^{28}\) In a sense, the concept allows the older generations to predict the direction of social change. This particular theory focuses on the continuation of social change versus simply focusing on maintaining a particular social order. Family groups can be an example of this social generation whose aim is to maintain social change. Some demographers prefer to use the term “generation” when referring to family units versus using the term “cohorts,” which is typically described as simply peer groups. Typically, the family level means that generational boundaries are fixed by the years separating the parent-offspring generation. However, according to Jane Pilcher, the age separation of mothers and grandmothers were not set or fixed because of the social and cultural changes in women’s lives.

Scott Myers and Alan Booth claim that Mannheim’s theory of forerunners relies on two contributing forces to develop future forerunners. The first factor is family origin. In other words, this theory relies on the assumption that the younger generation was raised by forerunner parents. This is an extremely important aspect to make this theory valid. According to Myers and Booth, the second contribution is the younger generation interpreting their adult experiences in a manner consistent with the values in the family of origin. As mentioned earlier, this is manifested based on the children being socialized by forerunner parents. Forerunner parents transmit and reinforce their own beliefs through language and actions, causing children to model their own behavior and beliefs from the

cues they receive from their parents. These values from forerunner parents tend to be consistent with the values and behaviors new generation forerunners will utilize in their adult lives.

Consequently, the factor of race and gender are not directly highlighted in this theory. Race and gender may only be applicable when discussing the stratification within the generations based on cultural or geographic locations. Ironically, this theory is applicable to the African cosmology of “passing down.” For example, the transitions African-American people have experienced highlight the validity of this social theory. If one were to apply Mannheim’s analysis, then each era within African-American history produced a group of forerunners. For example, enslavement produced an older generation of forerunners that carried over to the new generation of forerunners that existed during and after the Reconstruction era. In turn, the Reconstruction era birthed another generation that carried into the Jim Crow era and to the Civil Rights era.

However, it is evident that the effects of racism within each generation carried on to the next generation. Values associated with gender are also carried on beyond one generation. For example, Patricia Hill Collins highlights how young women are often groomed at an early age to become othermothers for their communities. In the context of this theory, Collins infers that othermothers are forerunners. In turn, then this is an example of how black womanhood and activism is maintained beyond one generation. The othermothers are not limited to one generation, but continued to maintain the survival of the black community. Comparatively, one of the tenants of Africana Womanism developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems highlights how Africana womanists respect their elders. The elders, according to Hudson-Weems, serve as role models,
paving the way for future generations. This respect and appreciation is a continuum of African culture.²⁹ Thus, the forerunners theory is applicable for black woman as well by demonstrating how black woman’s activism and consciousness extends beyond one generation. So, race and gender should be incorporated in this theory as a political component.

Methodology

This research was conducted by qualitative analysis. Case studies and oral narrative analysis are the qualitative methods used to analyze the data. Robert Yin describes how case study analysis is essential in understanding complex social phenomena.³⁰ Given the interdisciplinary approach to this research, the research needed the method of case study to analyze the data. In this research, this was highlighted by interviewing the individuals involved in the movement. Due to the number of participants in this research, this research used case studies as a collective, not as individual studies. Yin describes this as a community or collective case study. Furthermore, according to Yin, case studies help the research retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. In this research, these events consisted of childhood experiences, experiences with maternal figures, and their involvement in the Atlanta University Center student movement. Yin specifies using case studies when investigating a contemporary event in which the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. Comparatively, this research aimed at investigating a certain group who participated in a contemporary event:


the AUC student protest movement. However, their behaviors were not manipulated. So, the researcher relied on oral narratives from the participants. Case study methods usually highlight events that are not typically highlighted in the historical repertoire. As previously stated, the basis of case study relies on oral narrative analysis.

Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot defines narrative analysis as a mode conceptualizing the storied nature of human development by exploring psychological phenomena through storytelling to obtain information and comments regarding significant information.31 This research was not an exception to this, causing this research to integrate case studies and narratives analysis. Researchers who adopted narrative analysis found this method useful for understanding the complexity and diversity of life systems such as generations, life stages, cultures, and social and political ideologies. Black women’s activism entails various elements that cannot be answered in one methodology. Oral narratives remain an important form of methodology because it expands the scholarship’s knowledge by revisiting women’s historiography.32 Oral narrative analysis allows the researcher to interpret the data, even with the complexities the research presents. With that in mind, oral narrative analysis is appealing because its interpretive tools are designed to examine phenomena, issues, and people’s lives holistically. Thus, surveys were not considered to conduct this research because narrative analysis reveals complexities of the black woman’s experience from a cultural perspective.

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These stories were collected by the use of face-to-face interviews with six to seven black women student activists who participated in the Atlanta University Center (AUC) student protest movement. Case studies and oral narrative analysis was utilized to receive insight on a range of multiple, intersecting forces that order and illuminate relations between self and society. The overall methodological purpose of this research is to interpret the participant’s relation to society. All of these women are treated as a case study to allow for general and collective analysis of their mutual experiences with their mothers. Using the methodology of oral narrative analysis provided the researcher the opportunity to move beyond the written records (which reflect the experiences of privilege, white, educated women) to document the lives of all kinds of women, however, in this case, African-American women. While this research was focused on black women political activists, the important component was the detailed accounts of the maternal influences. The memories and stories of these maternal figures were documented by interviewing these participants. In other words, the bulk of this methodology centers around answering the questions as to why they decided to participate as political activists and whether or not maternal influences had anything to do with their desire to contribute in this movement.

Participants/Sample

Black women activists remain a very broad group of women. With that in mind, the participants of this research are specific to a particular group of black women. As stated earlier, the participants of this research were the black women involved during the

\(^{21}\) Daiute and Lightfoot, xii.

\(^{34}\) Gluck, 4.
Atlanta University Center Student Movement between 1960 and 1964. The researchers interviewed black women who participated in this movement were comprised in this sample. Participants are between sixty (60) years of age to seventy (70) years of age. All the participants reside in Atlanta, Georgia. The interviews were conducted in the participant's residence, work office, Woodruff library, and conference rooms within conference halls. In order to ensure that this study holds validity, I conducted face to face interviews with six to seven black women who participated in the AUC student movement. Specifically, I interviewed the black women who returned to Clark Atlanta University during the 50th year anniversary of the AUC Student Protest Movement.

Instrument

With the permission of the interviewers, the interviews will be recorded electronically. Participants of this research will be asked various questions regarding their role in the AUC student movement as well as their childhood experiences, specifically the impact of their maternal figures. The interview is divided into three major categories: 1) activities participated during the AUC Student Movement; 2) general questions regarding activism; 3) maternal figures influence and activism. Initially, the researcher asked them to describe their hometown, school attended while in the Atlanta University Center, major studied, and the years they attended their university. This was followed by a question pertaining to their lives after graduating from the AUC to their present profession. Afterwards, the researcher inquired about the specific role they played during the movement. They were asked to describe whether their desire to participate was based solely on their college experience or whether the seed was planted prior to their enrollment in the university. These questions were followed by general questions
regarding activism to see what they define as activism as well as whether they considered themselves activists because the researcher cannot assume that they consider themselves activists. The final section consisted of open-ended questions regarding her maternal figure's socioeconomic situation, influence, and activist activities to see whether the influence came from these figures.

The questions regarding the activities participated in during the AUC Student Movement may answer questions regarding the means in which black women participate in politics and activism during the Civil Rights era that the women lived. Additionally, they attempt to explain the origin of African-American women's activism. Questions regarding activism investigate these components as well. Yet the questions regarding maternal figure, influence and activism focuses mainly on whether this activism is "passed down" from the maternal figures to the mother. Additionally, while it also highlights the means in which black women participate in politics and activism, it focuses on how the maternal figures in the previous generation participated in this behavior.

This line of questioning was derived from Jack Daniel and Marta Effinger's research on "bosom biscuits." The purpose of their methodology was to analyze African American respondents' statements to the best advice that they had received from their primary caregivers. Their study focused the meaning of the best advice given, the relevance of the best advice for addressing the dominant recurring life situations and their resolutions deemed to be important to primary caregivers, and the respondent's

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perceptions of the critical outcomes of adhering to the best advice.36 This research incorporated this tool to determine maternal influence upon their daughters. While Daniel and Effinger focused on the overall family influence, this research specifically examined the mother’s influence. Moreover, unlike Daniel and Effinger’s study, this research investigated the behavior of the maternal figures versus focusing solely on the advice given. These black activists were asked to recall the activities of their maternal figures. If they did not remember a specific activity, they were provided a situation or experience they witnessed their maternal figure faced that may have shaped their political perspectives.

These open-ended questions permitted for the activists to tell their story regarding their mother’s influence as well as their roles during the AUC student protest. Data analysis based on the three themes of reassessing motherhood that Patricia Hill Collins highlights. When reassessing black motherhood Black feminist researchers have to emphasize the connections between choices available to black mothers resulting from their placement in historically-specific political economies, black mothers perceptions of their children’s choices are compared to what mothers thought those choices should be, and actual strategies employed by their children’s lives.37 However, this research modified her tenants of reassessing black motherhood.

While the factors detailed by Collins play major roles in black motherhood, she does not take into consideration how geographic location plays an integral role in how the

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36 Ibid., 189.

black mother views her space. Specifically, Collins does not take into consideration the mother’s experiences outside the context of her sociopolitical realities. Collin’s definition of reassessing motherhood is limited to the mother’s perspective without taking into consideration the daughter’s perspective of the motherhood. Thus, this research focused on the four modified themes of reassessing motherhood from the daughter’s perspective to guide the methodology: 1) geographic location of maternal figure and daughter, 2) maternal figure’s economic status, 3) maternal figures social experiences, and 4) daughter’s perception of those lessons and experiences.

Part of the data collection would consist of categorizing their responses based on the modified themes from Collins. First, I will see whether they mention geographic location of maternal figure and daughter. Then, see whether they mention the maternal figure’s economic status as well as their social experiences. Finally, I would analyze whether the participants mention their perception of those lessons and experiences. Once this data is completely collected, I will do a comparison between these women and well-known activists during that time such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elanie Brown to see whether a trend exists between all these women regarding the political influence of their maternal figures.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether maternal figures have a political influence on their daughters. Using the conceptual framework used earlier, this research is meant to test whether the theory of forerunners is applicable for African-American women. However, the research must first decipher whether these political behaviors are transferred from one generation to another. This study will investigate
whether these political behaviors of maternal figures influence their daughter’s political activism. Thus, in order to see whether the theory of forerunners is applicable for African-American women this research must answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do the political behaviors of African-American women maternal figures influence their daughter’s future political behavior?

2. How, if any, do the political behaviors of African-American maternal figures explain the origins of black women activists?

3. How do African-American women engage in politics and activism?

Limitations

Two limitations arose during the course of this research. One main limitation in this research was the challenge of receiving second-hand knowledge. Due to the age of the participants, their maternal figures may be deceased. So, this research received second hand information from daughters if the mothers are no longer living. Second, the research was analyzed from a small sample of black women activists. Since the participants were black women activists involved in the AUC student protest movement, there were not a large number of participants. Thus, generalizations cannot be made regarding black women activists. The research can only present the information the participants in this study provide. Finally, this research is limited to maternal figures such as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc. While research suggests that paternal influences exist among African-American women’s political participation, this research is focused on the maternal figures.
Chapter Organization

This thesis consisted of five chapters. Chapter I introduces the study by outlining the purpose of the study, statement of the problem, rationale, conceptual framework, and methodology. Chapter II investigates selected literature that correlates with this topic from other scholars that relates to maternal socialization, black mother-daughter relationships, and black women activists. Chapter III focuses on the historical context of Atlanta, Georgia during the 1960s and the height of the college student participation in the 1960s to see how these two factors contributed to the rise of the Atlanta University Center Student Protest Movement of the 1960s. In Chapter IV, I will present the analysis of the data from a qualitative research perspective. Finally, Chapter V will conclude the thesis as well as provide recommendations for future research ventures regarding this topic.
Definition of Terms

a) Political behavior: A method of political participation that involves 1) recognizing one’s political ideologies; 2) recognizing when certain problems within the community have not been addressed; and 3) utilizing those ideologies and realizations in a tangible manner to facilitate change in a particular community.

b) Political activity: A visible, tangible method of political participation to facilitate change within a community that includes, but not limited to: voting, grassroots movements, running for office, changing public policy.

c) Nontraditional political activities: An alternative political action that is not within the realm of traditional politics, but still with the intent to facilitate social change in the community. In terms of African American historical realities, this behavior can consist of (but not limited to) boycotts, marches, sit-ins, involvement in church activities, picketing.

d) Traditional political activities: Political actions recognized by the American political system which includes, but not limited to, registering to vote, voting, and holding political office.

e) Activism: Any action in which the intent is to facilitate social change in the community including, but not limited to, grassroots, legal, or government level.

f) Politics: A process of interaction with others and continuous political activity whose goal is focused on what is best for the community.

g) Maternal Figures: Any motherly, female figure related to an individual by blood or common ancestry. This also includes those women who are not related by blood, but
who were heavily influential in the individual’s life. This includes but not limited to mother, grandmother, sister-in-law, aunt, older female cousin, church member, community leader, or neighbor.

h) “Passing Down”: An African centered ideology that describes the process in which an older generation of people provides the newer generations with the tools they need to carry on their cultural values, social norms, and the tools need to ensure survive for the future generation either through their action or words.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter contains literature pertaining to black motherhood and black women's activism. It highlights a sociological perspective, providing literature regarding maternal socialization. Furthermore, it provides how the scholarship deciphers the unique relationship between black mothers and daughters. Overall, literature pertaining to black women activism and black motherhood is usually analyzed as separate entities, limited to one particular generation. While research introduces the influence of black mothers upon black women activists, it does not focus specifically on whether these two factors are interconnected when analyzing black women’s involvement in political activities.

Maternal Socialization

Much research exists pertaining to maternal socialization and mother-daughter relationships. According to Vern Bengtson, family is usually considered the most important mechanism in value socialization.¹ With that in mind, the question is whether or not maternal socialization has more influence over the son or daughter’s political ideology. In terms of parental socialization of political ideologies, much work has been done on male activists. However, scholars found that politically active mothers have more influence than fathers over their children’s political ideologies. Typically, these

studies are found among sociologists and psychologists. For example, Kenneth Keniston assessed in his research how mothers have more influence upon their sons, especially if the sons are disappointed in their fathers.² More often than not, the mothers appeared to be the epitome of these family values, given their freedom from professional and financial commitments.³ He concludes that political identifications originate in homes with active mothers, whose own work and values embody nurturing concern for others.

Comparatively, Richard Flacks research on Chicago male activists highlight how their mothers were typically professionally employed in service roles such as teaching and social work. While these mothers were employed, they were symbols for the male activists by transmitting familial values of altruism and social concern to their sons.⁴ This research infers that mother’s employment status and concern for social justice influence the child’s decision to participate in political activist activities. Moreover, this research highlights that maternal influence plays a major part in their children’s political ideologies and activities. Flacks’ research is applicable to this research because it reports that mothers transfer societal values to their children. Additionally, the forerunners theory presented by Karl Mannihem supports their research since the mothers of male activists were active community leaders. Keniston’s research is further validated by Richard


³ Keniston, 120-121.

Braungart, who noted in his research that ideologies of students tend to be consistent with the attitudes of both parents. Braungart's research focused solely on conducting a comparative analysis of mothers and fathers to see which parental tie influences political involvement among children. Yet, Branugart implies that both sons and daughters tend to identify more frequently with mothers than with fathers, although this is more prevalent among females than among males. Similar to Keniston and Mannhiem, Braungart attempts to determine whether or not parent-child relationships influence protest-prompting families. Also, his research speaks to answer whether or not a strong maternal tie is associated with political activism generally or distinctively with leftist activism.

Braungart's research found that identification with father rather than mother was rare while a larger percentage of the participants identified with their mothers. When exploring the minority students, his research claims that males in general could identify and communicate with their mothers but not their fathers. However, while males appeared to feel closer to their mothers than their fathers, this pattern is not limited to males. In fact, the exclusive maternal attachment is more frequently for females than for males. Similar to Keniston and Flacks, Branugart contends that the trend of mother socialization is more prevalent among daughters than sons.


6. Ibid., 465.

7. Ibid., 472.
Alan Acock and Vern Bengston cosign to the scholarship by suggesting that socialization theory should give greater emphasis to parental influence, particularly of the mother, on political and religious orientations. Acock and Bengston examines the degree of similarity between parents and young adults pertaining to behaviors and orientations. Additionally, they attempted to investigate the degree of sex-lineage similarities in political and religious issues. In their quantitative analysis, they assess the contribution of the father and mother in predicting the child’s ideologies as well as determining how this is specified by the gender linkage. They generally concluded that there is a higher level of parent-child predictivity, thereby suggesting the importance of within-family socialization influences.

However, their research provides another concrete example of how the mother is substantially more important than the father on the legitimacy of black demands, conservatism, and family. They used these variables in order to determine which parent has more influence over the child’s socialization among several dimensions. With that in mind, they concluded that if one parent is used to represent family influence in socialization of children’s orientations, it is typically the mother because of her higher

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9. Ibid., 519-520.

10. Ibid., 524-525.

11. Ibid., 525.
level of predictivity. Ironically, they did not find any substantial evidence that suggests sex-specific differences in predictivity. All of the scholars mentioned above highlight the importance of maternal socialization over paternal socialization. Yet, their primary focus is to decipher which parent has more influence over their child’s future political ideology. Their research started by focusing on the mother-son relationship. Consequently, they discovered how mother socialization affects mother-daughters relationships. Overall, their interpretations are limited because their research does not take into consideration how culture based on gender and race influence maternal socialization. Just recently, scholars have focused more on maternal influences.

Carol Boyd compiles research from various sociologist and psychologist who investigate this unique relationship. Based on her research, she asserts that the bulk of research pertaining to mother-daughter relationships is derived from social learning theorists as an attempt to explain why girls become like their mothers. Several studies do show that mothers tend to be influential in forming their daughters gender and economic ideologies. Moreover, she asserts that psychoanalytical theories regarding mother-daughter theories focus on what causes mother-daughter relationships to differ from other relationships, such as one between father and son. In contrast, Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis assert how this traditional psychoanalytical framework may yield important discoveries for white women. Yet, the traditional white analysts fall short when including the black female population in their analysis because the research does not investigate the cultural perspective of black mother-daughter relationships.
Kathleen Blee’s and Ann Tickamyer’s research indicates what other scholars neglected regarding the factors of race and gender by investigating whether race differences reflect the daughters’ actual adult attitudes and behavior. They found some sex-specific differences when they conducted a comparative analysis between white women and black women in terms of transmission of sex-role attitudes. They emphasize how daughters may be influenced in adolescent and adulthood by their mothers’ attitudes and values about sex roles. Yet, Blee and Tickamyer determine that the influence of mothers on daughters vary based on race. Part of their research found that black mothers have a greater influence overall on their daughters than white mothers. In their assessment, the major difference between black and whites mothers lie not only in the relationships between attitudes and behavior within that cohort, but the manner in which these are transmitted across generations. They later find that the transmission process for blacks and whites differ based on timing. Black daughters are influenced as adults more than during their adolescents while white daughters appear to be affected at both adulthood and adolescence. Moreover, Blee and Tickamyer highlight the mother’s employment status is a major component in influencing the daughter’s sex-role attitudes. They imply that women who work and see their work as appropriate should produce daughters who work, value their work roles, and see these roles as a generally appropriate option for married women. In the same assessment, they outline that historically black

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13 Ibid., 219.
women have a stronger work orientation than white women. Black women remains central figures in the economic lives of their families more than white women. This causes the image of the housewife role to become less attractive to young black daughters. Thus, black women and daughters have less traditional attitudes about sex roles than white women.

Blee and Tickamyer report that black daughter’s work behavior has a significant effect on sex-role attitudes imposed upon by their mothers. In other words, black mothers have a significant impact upon their daughter’s sex-role attitudes and work behavior. Consequently, white mother’s employment during their daughter’s adolescence does not have a significant effect on their daughters sex role attitudes or work behavior. Overall, Blee and Tickamyer conclude that black daughters tend to model their mother’s behavior, while white daughters model their mother’s attitudes. This finding supports Mannhiem’s theory of forerunners by introducing the phenomenon on how black daughters continue their mother’s forerunner behavior. Consequently, Blee and Tickamyer’s assessment focused solely on the economic influence of maternal figures while ignoring their political behaviors. Edmond Costantini, however, investigates women’s political ambition. Costanini defines political ambition of women as the desire for political enhancement of women. The data presented in Costanini’s research confirms the multidimensionality that motivations political activity. In his research, he creates four

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categories to determine women’s political ambition and activity. One of those four categories determining political ambition is parental involvement. Costanini infers that the politics of women activists rely solely on parental occupation or education. In fact, similar to Blee and Tickamyer, he claims that social integration and community involvement are two variables that explain women’s political participation. Furthermore, according to Costanini, being employed outside the home, having a religious affiliation, and being civically active each proves to be independently predictive of political ambition. Overall, he concludes that ambition precedes civic activism for political women. Again, while it focuses on political activism of women, it does not focus on the political involvement of black women.

**Black Motherhood and Socialization**

While other scholars analyze the affect white mothers have upon their daughters or sons, Blee and Tickamyer introduced the influence that black mothers have upon their daughters. They state that black daughters mirror their mother’s behavior. Comparatively, Bonnie Dill determines that one must differentiate black and white women because black woman’s experience incorporates racial oppression, class exploitation, and patriarchy.15 Part of the black women’s experience is investigating their notion of mothering, particularly mother-daughter relationships. An analysis of this relationship among black mother and daughters must be revised to consider the particular experiences and

perceptions of black women.\textsuperscript{16} For example, according to Marci Bounds Littlefield, black womanhood and motherhood during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was connected to the system of slavery that bound them as chattel and not as true women. For black women during slavery, their motherhood was not a separated role than their status as slaves. Signe Hammer's implies that ethnicity is not a determining factor in determining mother-daughter relationships. In fact, she asserts that psychologically mothers and daughters have the same kind of relationship regardless of race or ethnic background. In her novel, \textit{Daughters and Mothers, Mothers and Daughter}, she includes an analysis of ethnic difference only when necessary. She focuses on this relationship in strictly biological terms and responsibilities of mothers and daughters.

However, Gloria Joseph, Jill Lewis, and Patricia Hill Collins state that race and ethnicity redefine the mother-daughter relationships, extending this relationship beyond strictly biological terms. Additionally, it does not infer a close or compatible relationship. Hammer puts this relationship in its most primitive aspects because the mother fulfills the daughter's physical demands and needs. The mother only plays the role of the protector and comforter for the daughter. In turn, the daughter allows the mother to feel needed and wanted, becoming a sacred symbol. Thus, Hamer infers that this is a relationship based on reciprocity. However, Joseph, Lewis, and Collins branch from her research, asserting that black mother-daughter relationships as a cultural entity. Bonnie T. Dill quotes from Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis' novel, \textit{Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives}, in her analysis of black women's domestic work transferring

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 139.
generations. Particularly, she focuses on the chapter, "Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society," quoting Joseph and Lewis' analysis of the unique nature of black mother-daughter relationships. This chapter of their book investigates black women and their position in society, attitudes towards mothers, socialization of their daughters, and messages that are transmitted from one generation of women to another. Patricia Hill Collins adds to their analysis in her novel, *Black Feminist Thought*. She has a chapter entitled "Black Women and Motherhood," where she analyzes black motherhood from a sociological context. Similar to Joseph and Lewis, Collins focuses on the socialization of black mothers upon their daughters. Yet, Collins evaluates this relationship from a black sociological perspective while Joseph and Lewis investigate this entity from a cultural and historical perspective.

All three scholars deliberately reject the assumption that all mother-daughter relationships are different. In fact, the purpose of Joseph and Lewis' work was intended to fit into the popular literature pertaining to mother-daughter relationships. However, Joseph and Lewis recognized and highlighted how it would be "dysfunctional to engage in a discussion of black mothers and daughters which focused on specific psychological mechanisms operating between the two, the dynamics of this crucial bond, and explanations of the explicit role of patriarchy, without including the important relevancy of racial oppression as a critical factor for consideration." 17 Joseph, Lewis, and Collins

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agree certain aspects differentiate black mother-daughter relationships from other marginalized groups. They assess that these relationships must incorporate the historical and cultural realities of black women and people. Additionally, they highlight the importance of "othermothers" within the black mother-daughter relationship. These scholars infer how the transmission of knowledge is an integral component to this relationship. Specifically, they claim that this phenomenon of transmission is a method of black maternal socialization providing daughters the tools they needed for survival. In discussing the roles and functions of this unique relationship, Joseph and Lewis reveal how black mother-daughter interactions must be described within the context of the black family network. According to them, an analysis of the black community as a whole will shed light upon the special role of the black mother. Motherhood is viewed differently in African-American community than any other racial group. In fact, Collins outlines how the institution of black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self.\(^\text{18}\) Thus, black motherhood must be evaluated in the context of African-American culture and history. Collins further stipulates how historically the concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the philosophies of people of African descent. Unlike Hamer's assessment, black motherhood in the black community is viewed beyond biological roles and

functions. Overall, Collins, Lewis, and Joseph claim that culture plays a significant role in the discussion of black motherhood.

Socialization of black children extends past the nuclear household. Extended family member such as grandmothers, aunts, older sisters, cousins, and nieces frequently play major roles in the care and rising of young children.\(^1^9\) Collins, Lewis, and Joseph discover how this phenomenon must be included in any analysis focusing on black mother-daughter relationships. They do not look at mothers as simply the biological, blood-related caregiver. When discussing black mother-daughter relationships, it is important to include the role of other women figures, such as grandmothers, siblings, aunts, and niece because they are all considered common mother figures. This is evident in Collins assessment of community “othermothers”. Collins does an extensive analysis of black mothers, in which she describes them in a biological and non-biological context. Othermothers are individuals who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, which has traditionally been central to the institution of black motherhood.\(^2^0\) Collins, like Joseph and Lewis, believes that the larger community is responsible for children by giving “othermothers” rights to child rising. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as “othermothers” by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children.\(^2^1\) Thus, these three scholars reject Hammer’s notion that

\(^{19}\) Joseph and Lewis, 82.

\(^{20}\) Collins, 178.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 178.
motherhood is simply a biological responsibility limited to one individual. Black motherhood is an inclusive responsibility, where the entire community takes a part in rearing a child. Joseph, Lewis, and Collins assert that black motherhood is inclusive to several women family members.

Additionally, Joseph, Lewis, and Collins state how the transmission of knowledge is essential in black mother’s socialization. Black motherhood is reevaluated by the choices she based on her historical realities and the means in which it is transferred to her children. Moreover, the transmission from one generation to the next is extended beyond the biological mother and daughter. According to Joseph and Lewis, black mothers are aware of the type of problems their daughters will encounter throughout their life, based on the experiences being raised in a white, male-dominated, heterosexual, racist society. In other words, she does not have to read a book to know that her daughter will have to struggle to find decent education, a decent job, and a reliable husband. Consequently, this reality is not limited to the mothers. Black daughters watch their mother struggle economically and socially to provide for their families. Specifically, black daughters learn at an early age that their mothers are not personally responsible for not being able, through their individual efforts, to make basic changes in their lives or the lives of their children. Joseph and Lewis infer that the daughter experiences empathy and a sensitivity to the many roles her mother is performing, reacting with deep feelings for


23. Ibid., 96.
mother and perceptions of black women’s place in society. Moreover, Collins reasserts the same analysis when she highlights how African-American motherhood emphasizes the connection between choices available to black mothers resulting from their placement in historically-specific political economies. 24 Joseph, Lewis, and Collins claims how black mothers view their daughters’ lives based on their own experiences along the lines of race, class, and sex. Under such conditions, black mothers aim to teach their daughters skills that will take them anywhere. They point out that black mother-daughter relationships are different than others because of this phenomenon of intergenerational transmission.

Ultimately, black daughter’s socialization, through the means of intergenerational transmission, is essential to her survival. For example, Marci Littleton claims that the importance of survival among African-American women and their children developed as a result of slavery. She claims how slavery created a “forced motherhood experienced by black women that defined their existence and influenced their survival.” 25 Thus, given black women’s historical realities, survival remains an important component to explore within black motherhood and womanhood. According to Collins, in order to ensure their daughter’s physical survival, their mothers must teach them to fit into the sexual politics of black womanhood.


Typically, this idea of black womanhood encompasses self-identification as black woman, as well as her placement in society and community. This is manifested by the idea that black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential for their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible. Comparatively, Joseph and Lewis state how black daughter’s familiarity with the circumstances which their mother’s existed and raised their children caused empathy among their daughters. However, despite the dangers, mothers still encouraged black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions, such as education and working. Black daughters must learn how to survive the sexual politics of the intersecting forms of oppressions while rejecting and transcending these same power relations. Joseph and Lewis state how it is still necessary for Black mothers and daughters to collaborate in their fight against powerful societal conditions. Mothers provide the blueprint for this nontraditional political activist behavior. Thus, all the scholars would agree that the primary objective for black mother—daughter relationships and socialization relies on giving their daughters the tools of survival, that later plant the seed for future activism.

_Influences upon Black Women Activists_

Scholarly literature in black women’s scholarship introduces how the formative years influence black women’s activist behaviors. Specifically, in most texts referring to black women activists, they highlight the maternal influences. Shirley Yee’s analysis of
black women abolitionist highlights how family fortune was an important factor shaping black women’s activism and leading some women to assume leadership in their communities.26 Yee claims that black women abolitionists understood their social responsibility to help their communities. Yet Yee’s analysis of formative years is limited to black women of a particular socioeconomic class. Kim Lacy Rogers research on black women activists in New Orleans investigates childhood experiences of these activists. Her research focuses on three activists, namely Ms. Oretta Castle Haley, Mrs. Rosa Freeman Keller, and Mrs. Doris Jean Castle-Scott. These three activists shared with her how their childhood memories and youth increased their awareness and feelings about racial segregation and oppression.27 Rogers infers how their complex experiences influence their perceptions of social change. Yet Kim Rogers does not specifically investigate maternal influences. In this same context, Elice Rogers’ theory of “Afritics” also incorporates formative influences of black women activists in Chicago, Illinois.

Elice Rogers’s methodology incorporates analyzing how an African-American woman’s learning experiences influence leadership development.28 The black women in her study are conflicted with this “double-consciousness” by recognizing that the European and African-American perspective on politics often conflict with one another.


From the African-American perspective, these women learn from their experiences acquired in family, church, and community how to use afritics and move from margin to center. Elice Rogers, however, does not look at the mother’s as an integral component to forming political consciousness. Yet, some scholarly texts refer to black women activists maternal influences. For example, in Margo V. Perkins novel, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, she does a throughout analysis of the autobiographies of nationalists Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Assta Shakur were activism refers to a process towards revolutionary consciousness. Perkins analysis argues that revolutionaries are not so much born as made by circumstances of their social milieu and by their exposure to critical pedagogy. In her novel, she has a chapter focused on how their formative years frame their future activism. By analyzing their autobiographies, she focuses on how their families and childhood experiences formed their revolutionary ideologies. These women’s early personal experiences both reshaped their understanding of the dynamics of race, class, and gender oppression in America and motivated their eventual involvement in political struggles. Davis, Brown, and Shakur’s autobiographies all theorize how their past personal experiences highlight the process on how the personal becomes political.

Research done on black women community activists also pinpoint to a specific maternal figure that formed their activist ideologies. Such as LaVerne Gyant’s research

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on African-American women activists during the Civil Rights era. Gyant argues that black women were the backbone of the movement. In her analysis, she found that women who have strong religious and family backgrounds often led them to work with and organize activities outside traditional organizations such as the NAACP.\textsuperscript{30} She finds that women involved in the movement were motivated by early childhood experiences to fight for the rights of African-American people. Part of these experiences involved maternal influences. Some speak of the strength that their mothers and grandmothers demonstrated in fighting the everyday battles of oppression, racism, and sexism as well as their efforts to provide them with better opportunities.\textsuperscript{31}

Nancy Naples analysis of “activists mothering” explains how motherhood and activism among certain classes and racial groups play similar roles by extending motherhood to include the care for the community. Naples investigates African-American and Latina community activists in New York and Philadelphia. The significance of her research is that it examines the social construction of mothering as well as the cross-generational continuity of “activist mothering” for their communities.\textsuperscript{32} Their personal narratives highlight formative experiences fueling their political behavior. African-American women and Latinas interviewed uniformly identified many experiences with


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 636.

\textsuperscript{32} Naples, 442.
racism, which included some of their earliest childhood memories.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, Naples highlight how these community workers attribute their success as community workers to their parents, who helped them understand and confront the discrimination they would eventually face. In fact, these workers expressed resentment regarding the experiences their parents faced with racial discrimination. It was clear to Naples from their personal narratives that these perceptions had profound effects on their commitment to community work. Naples research provides evidence that women become the informal caretakers of their communities. Yet, this was not isolated to their generation, but a learned behavior they received from their mother. In fact, she mentions how the majority of the women she interviewed claimed that their mothers were involved in a variety of helping activities in their neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{34}

Much of their activities are labeled as nontraditional political activities, such as helping in hospitals, helping to care for the elderly, and advocating for child-care programs. Thus, these women saw their mothers actively participate in their communities. These activists claim how their mothers taught them how to create and sustain community ties. These skills become the foundation activists later utilized within their communities. Comparatively, Cheryl Rodriguez also states how "othermothers" become the figure for black women activism. She found in her research on black women activists in Tampa, FL how the development of black feminist or womanist intellectuals

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 450.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 452.
and creative thinkers can be traced directly to the persistent and vigilant encouragement of grandmothers, mothers, and other women in their childhood communities. All the activists in her research highlights how these women planted seeds for their activities. Rodriguez concludes how black women activists received their womanist intellectual roots by witnessing and internalizing their mother’s daily acts of resistance and struggle.

Patricia Hill Collins provides an analysis of motherhood and activism in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*. In the chapter entitled “Black Women and Motherhood”, she highlights the relationship between community “othermothers” and political activism as it pertains to black women’s epistemology. These women work on behalf of the children, women, and men of their communities with little fanfare or recognition. However, these black women activists become a political symbol for the black community. Collins defines motherhood as a symbol of power for black women’s community work.

Motherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community mothermother, can be viewed as a symbol of power by African-American women engaged in Black women’s community work. Collins infers how this symbol is actually a reflection of African-American women’s status in the overall community. Also, she claims that community “othermothers” model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward. Yet she evaluates this from a

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sociological perspective, limited to one generation. She does not evaluate whether this symbol of power transcends generations.

Conclusion

Based on the research highlighted in this literature review, it is evident that there is a lack of research tying black mother-daughter relationships and how they influence black women activisms. This literature review proves that research is presented on mother’s influence on daughter’s activism. However, while they do tend to investigate maternal influences, it is typically part of a larger study. The literature proves that black daughters are heavily influenced by their mother’s behavior. Specifically, the literature reiterates how important maternal figures are in shaping their daughter’s political activism. Unfortunately, this has not been studied independently. Most of the studies mentioned in this literature review are segments of larger studies that focus specifically on either mother-daughter relationships or black women’s activism. These two phenomenons are viewed as separate entities instead of interlocking forces. Thus, this research is aimed to decipher whether there is a link between black mother-daughter socialization and influences on future black women activists.
CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ATLANTA UNIVERSITY STUDENT PROTEST MOVEMENT FROM 1960 TO 1961

The ultimate test of a mother’s influence is how her daughter survives once she leaves her mother’s care. The first experience outside of their mother’s home may occur once the daughter attends college. People from all over the United States traveled to the various colleges and universities that make up Atlanta University Center (AUC). During the 1960s, with the sociopolitical strains taking place, the mothers who brought their daughters to the AUC may not have realized the circumstances they placed their daughters in. The AUC and the city of Atlanta were in the mist of racial turmoil due to segregation. While it is claimed to be the “Black Mecca”, the people of Atlanta, Georgia were fighting against same issues with segregation as they were throughout the United States. This reality infiltrated into the AUC. With that in mind, this period marked a drastic increase of student participation in the Civil Rights movement because of the urge of mobilize the Civil Rights movement through the grassroots concept of participatory democracy. Under the participatory democracy Civil Rights leaders such as Ella Baker urged a broader participation. The ideas of participatory democracy encouraged a broader base for decision-making within social movement organizations. ¹

With that in mind, this research must highlight the sociopolitical climate in Atlanta, Georgia during the 1960s as it pertains to the Civil Rights movement as well as how that infiltrated to the AUC. The environment may have ignited the seed placed within the black women activists by their mothers.

Investigating this time period is multidimensional. According to Margo Perkins, those intimately involved in the political events of that era, makes it both an exciting and difficult period to write about because while the key players are still alive, that also means the stories, themselves, are alive as well. Additionally, looking at the black women who participated in this movement adds a unique perspective to this movement as well. For example, Ann Standley recognizes how historians of this movement often prove the failure to consider the impact of the movement on black women’s consciousness as well as the lack of recognition to the contributions of women in making racial pride possible. Not only does one have to evaluate these stories, one must also analyze how location plays a role in these movements. Atlanta, Georgia is considered to be one of the most progressive cities for African Americans in the Southeast region. For example, Atlanta elected its first black mayor in 1965, five years after the 1960s protest in the Atlanta University Center.


City of Atlanta during the 1960s

Before conducting a historical analysis of the Atlanta University Center, one must take a look at the climate in Atlanta, Georgia during the 1960s. Typically, Atlanta, Georgia is described as the “Black Mecca” of the Southeast region of the United States. This location remains an example of African American progression. In fact, during the 1960s, the black population in Atlanta increased 36.8 percent while the white population declined by 20 percent. These numbers helped the black political power in Atlanta. According to political scientists, Mack Jones, a combination of the black economic strength, registration, and voting statistics, and the level of black officeholders caused the black population to potentially be an important force in Atlanta, Georgia. However, even with the large number of African American people, this population did not have political representation and power. So, while population strength is necessary, it is not the only factor needed black prominence in local political systems. Atlanta, Georgia is a prime example of this analysis. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, the black populations in Atlanta, Georgia remain pioneers of change.

History shows that Atlanta, Georgia’s black population has a long history of developing creative and innovated ways of solving its social problems. Various organizations and societies developed in Atlanta by African-American people were a means of reacting to the lack of educational, economic and sociopolitical opportunities. From the reaction of the Riot of 1905 to the development of the National Urban League

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in Atlanta are examples how African-American people in Atlanta reacted to social
problems. Moreover, the Atlanta branch of the National Association for the Advancement
of Color People (N.A.A.C.P) was organized as early as 1917, where it has remained a
viable organization in this region. Ross asserts how these activities established and
demonstrated the pre-eminence of Atlanta as a center for black thought and black
advancement. According to Edyth Ross, Atlanta’s history provided the historical
foundation for the rise of the Civil Rights activities of the 1950s and 1960s. One of the
major factors that helped African-American people gain political access was the activities
that took place during the 1960s. Unlike the movements in the past, the Civil Rights
movement and revolts of the 1960s opened the door for blacks to receive access to new
employment opportunities in business, government, media, and high paying jobs in the
skilled crafts.7

The Brown v. Board of Education decision gave birth to a new generation of Civil
Rights activists in Atlanta, Georgia. These individuals had the motivation to challenge
both the leaders and the tactics of the past.8 The black communities in Atlanta, Georgia
felt a sense of impatience, waiting on negotiations. Instead, they started to use another
tactic in order to facilitate change: protests. Thus, the sit-ins represented this shift in
political consciousness. The 1960s sit-in movement represented the effort to end the
exclusion of blacks from Atlanta’s public accommodations, effort to end white patron-
black client relationships, and enabled blacks to assertive in making a wide array of

7. Smith, 20.

8. Clarence Stone, “Atlanta: Protest and Elections are not Enough,” American Political Science
Association 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1986): 621.
claims. Not only was there hostility between the white and black communities, but also among the black leaders as well. With the large black population in Atlanta, it created a better opportunity for black leadership.

However, most of these leaders were often not trusted by the greater population. In fact, within the community there were divergences of opinion and political styles, and there was much disagreement, sometimes rather bitter in tone, over the proper tactics that should be used in gaining equality.\(^9\) Black people in the community did not trust the black leaders in Atlanta. Many times they viewed the black leaders as enemies along with the white leaders. The black community and student protestors described the black leaders as "handkerchief heads," "accommodators," or "Uncle Toms."\(^{10}\) Therefore, this double bounded hostility in Atlanta, Georgia caused the students in the AUC to react, taking matters into their own hands.

_Spring of 1960: Height and Reaction of Student Sit-in Movements_

After the _Brown v. Board of Education_ decision, the Civil Rights movement started to slow down in intensity. This Supreme Court decision set a precedent for several Civil Rights issues dealing with race. Yet, the manifestation of this decision did not become a reality as soon as people hoped. Moreover, organizations such as Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in 1957, and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), were not having the groundswell that the black Civil Rights leaders anticipated. Civil Rights leaders, such as Ella Baker, feared that they were losing their

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 104.
motivation. However, the movement received its charge the spring of 1960, when college students started fighting with the community against social injustices. Students across the southeastern region of the United States participated in large numbers during the Civil Rights Movement. This drastically shifted the dynamics of the movement.

Student sit-ins pumped a new life into the Civil Rights Movement as well as exercised profound tactical and strategic influence over the entire course of social and political upheavals of the 1960s. While sit-ins were conducted prior to this era, college students brought a younger, militant, determined spirit that forced America to seriously evaluate their limited construct of human rights. Lunch counters in dime stores where the sit-ins were conducted, provided an environment well suited for the students direct action ideas. After all, blacks were able to shop in all areas of the dime store, but they had to sit at a different counter. These student driven sit-ins reinvigorated the movement, causing leaders to have powerful incentives in magnifying their role in organizing future protests. Before the involvement of college students, black organizations and black churches were the most influential players behind previous sit-in protests. These two entities acted as the driving forces behind various protest movements because they relied on one another for black political power. Direct action organizations of black organizations clung to the black church because their survival depended on it.

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Moreover, sit-ins prior to the 1960s were tentative tests rather than campaigns, and they did not spread to other cities. In earlier sit-in movements, most of the organizers knew each other and were well aware of each other's strategies for confrontation. More importantly, the networking tool was not as prevalent prior to 1960. The student sit-in movements developed a unique publicity. Movement organization, social networks, news media, and current conditions in that city were three channels that were relatively important and facilitated the widespread student sit-in movements. Black college students participated in large numbers because they were inspired by the activities of their peers in other cities. Most of these protests occurred in cities where there was a larger percentage of African Americans who had the adequate resources and where political opportunities were more favorable. One of those areas was the Atlanta University Center in Atlanta, Georgia. They wanted to do their part in facilitating racial equality in their communities. Thus, these college students planned their own sit-in movement, hoping for the same success. As mentioned earlier, the students in the Atlanta University Center were inspired by their peers who conducted a sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The first wave of consciousness among black student protesters occurred on February 1, 1960. On this date, four freshman students, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University staged a sit-in at the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro,

14 Ibid., 749-750.
15 Andrews and Biggs, 753.
16 Ibid., 753.
North Carolina. They brought several small items and sat down at the whites-only counter. Yet they knew they would not be served. A white waitress announced that she could not serve them. However, they simply pulled out their items and insisted that the store served black customers. Even when people tried to provoke the students, they continued to sit at the counter in silence. Facing forward, looking expectant, their bodies continually posed the question, “Why can’t we be served?” The Greensboro sit-in is important because it represents a unique link in a long chain of sit-ins.18

While they were not the first students to participate in a sit-in movement, their actions marked the beginning of college student-driven protest. Within a week of the initial Greensboro sit-in, similar sit-in protests were conducted throughout the South. Between the months of February and March of 1960, major sit-in demonstrations and related activities were conducted in at least sixty-nine (69) Southern cities. In fact, protesters recalled first learning about sit-ins in other cities through newspaper, radio, or television.19 Others received their information simply by word of mouth through networking between universities. They were informed of the information through networks such as Greek organizations, church groups, dating, and athletic sports. Lonnie King received information about the Greensboro sit-in through a front-page newspaper article in Atlanta Daily World two days after the event. He eventually shared this news with Julian Bond during a casual conversation, which soon lead to the planning of the AUC movement.

17. Foster, 398.
18. Morris, 748
19. Andrew and Biggs, 753.
The hype of the sit-ins during the 1960s soon started to cause government legislatures to react. While the demonstrations typically remained passive, many of the dime store and department store owners started to complain. Due to the economic leverage of these places in many states, governments started passing anti-trespass laws. Some states had this statue prior to this movement, such as North Carolina and Florida. The Georgia state legislature was one of many states that passed special anti-trespass statues to combat the demonstrations. A typical anti-trespass statue stipulated how it was unlawful to remain on someone else’s premises when asked to leave by the owner or anyone in charge. A violation of this status resulted in a misdemeanor charge. Regardless of this statue, the students in North Carolina still conducted their sit-in, inspiring their peers in the AUC.

The rise of the sit-in movements lead to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). By April 1960, student activists held a conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina to develop SNCC. The formation of this organization changed the face of black Civil Rights because these students sacrificed their education, reputation, and lives. They became a source of inspiration for the movement to keep its tenacity in order to obtain racial equality. The purpose of this organization originated in order to coordinate the student sit-in movements. Their goals soon started to broaden to integration of bus stations and lunch counters. By the following year, they started to focus on voter registration among poor blacks in the rural,

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deep South. However, before the organization shifted to other humanitarian issues, they focused on organizing sit-in movements. SNCC's leadership remained in the hands of college-aged students, which was unique for a recognized organization at that time. While some of the members of this organization were college drop outs, it remained student-centered. In fact, SNCC leadership was decentralized at the level of state or local project. Many of the members of SNCC were grassroots organizers, working primarily in the fields. Yet their primary goals were still politically-driven. SNCC was a political organization with the political goals centered on racial justice.

The Rise of the Atlanta University Student Protest Movement

During the 1960s, the students within the Atlanta University Center reacted to the hostile environment in Georgia as well as other places around the southeastern United States. At this time, the AUC consisted of Spellman College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown, Clark College, Atlanta University, and the Interdenominational Theological Center. The AUC was (and remains) one of the largest consortium of historically black colleges and universities in the United States. The students in Atlanta, Georgia witnessed the protest demonstrations by black students sweeping across the south in 1960s. This manifested a growing impatience among blacks all over the country with the progress being made to afford them social, economic, and political equality. There was realization that the democratic process, through the American court system, could not quickly combat the racism African-American people experienced daily in the American

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22 Ibid., 15.

23 Ibid., 17.

South. Furthermore, they realized that this was the world they were to enter into as professionals, where they saw limited opportunities to grow as individuals and into a race. The sit-in movements provided the students in the AUC the opportunity to react to the racial segregation in Atlanta, Georgia. It was a realization that they could do their part to fight for social justice. In fact, Lonnie King and Julian Bond all heard of the various student-run protests and realized that something like that needed to take place in Atlanta. In fact, Julian Bond asked his classmate Lonnie King, “Don’t you think it should happen here?” causing these two men to plan and lead the sit-in campaign in Atlanta. That motivation caused them to start planning similar demonstrations as early as February 4, 1960. Soon, a group of AUC students held a series of workshops and seminars on the meaning of nonviolence as well as techniques of picketing and organizing sit-ins.

Students and student leaders were excited about their proposed activities. Yet faculty members and administrators of the AUC were reluctant to join the students in this venture. The presidents of the five universities in the AUC frequently met in what they called the “Council of Presidents” of the Atlanta University Center. These meetings were often conducted to make decisions that would affect the entire AUC. When they were informed of what the students planned to do, they called for a meeting with the student leaders of each university. Two students from each of the six campuses met with the council for the first time in February. After their first collaborative meeting, the students

25 Mason, 97.


and presidents agreed to continue meeting twice a week. From this meeting, faculty members and administrators impressed the idea of a manifesto or statement to outline their grievances.

This hesitation in action soon became useful. Roselyn Pope, a student of Spelman College and President of their student government association, wrote the first draft of the manifesto, known as the "Appeal for Human Rights," (also known as "The Appeal"). After several revisions, Roselyn Pope read the final version of the Appeal to the Spelman student body. All the other universities adopted it as well. Soon, the manifesto appeared as a full-page advertisement in the Atlanta Constitution, the Atlanta Journal, and the Atlanta Daily World on March 9, 1960. This document set the stage for the sit-in activities that would occur after the publication of this document. Not only did the Appeal speak against the racial inequalities blacks faced, it also introduced the voice of the black college student. The Appeal alerted the citizens of Atlanta of the student’s determination to seek immediate change.

The Appeal outlined the racial inequality that took place in Atlanta, Georgia in various areas such as housing, education, jobs, hospitals, voting, law enforcement, and public entities. This manifesto was short, precise, and well researched. For example, they outlined the lack of black representation in Atlanta’s law enforcement, highlighted the amount of federal funds allotted to black colleges versus prominently white universities, and the limited amount of housing given to the large population of African-American

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28 Lefever, 28.

people in Atlanta. The authors of this document not only highlighted the current climate of race relations in Atlanta, they also asserted what they planned to do in response to those conditions. After informing the public of the inequalities taking place, they outline their analysis of racism in America. So, their charge for the Appeal was to document the racial oppression African-American people in Atlanta experienced as well as informing the public of their future sit-in activities. In fact, at the end of their document, they candidly expressed how they planned to use every legal and non-violent means at their disposal to secure full citizenship rights as members of this great Democracy.\footnote{Ibid.} This document received local and national recognition. After all, their appeal was not only directed towards the citizens of Atlanta, Georgia but to individuals across the United States. The Appeal set the stage for the students in the Atlanta University Center. Unlike other student protest movements, the students of the AUC had documentation outlining their goals, mission, and plan of action. Moreover, it presents a united front among various black colleges and universities that never occurred before. Most universities acted separately. Yet, the AUC student movement became a collaborative effort to combat the racism faced in Atlanta, Georgia as well as throughout the nation.

More importantly, it literally gave the black college students a voice during this time. While the sit-ins became a means for black college students to make their presence known, the Appeal acted as the actual voice of the young black college student. This generation rarely had a voice during this time. Most of the voices regarding racial equality were from black leaders such as church and black organization leaders. However, the Appeal spoke on behalf of college students, who witnessed and
experienced the same perils of racism. Their voice was militant, determined, and intellectual. They were not only speaking for African-American people, but for all humanity. Thus, the Appeal made their activities distinctive to that of other college protest movements.

Starting March 15, 1960 was the first phase of the sit-in demonstrations in Atlanta, Georgia. Their lawyers urged them to select establishments at city and county courthouses, lunch counters located in federal buildings, and cafeterias connected with bus and train terminals as targets for their first sit-ins in order to be protected by the Fourteenth (14th) Amendment. Approximately two hundred students (200) from the AUC participated in the sit-in on this date. However, due to the Georgia anti-trespass legislation, seventy-seven (77) students were arrested. The Fulton County prosecutor charged the seventy-seven students with four counts: 1) breaching the peace, 2) intimidating restaurant owners, 3) refusing to leave the premises, and 4) conspiracy.31 The prosecutor also charged the six signatures of the Appeal, bringing up the total arrested in the first sit-in to eighty-three (83). However, the students were never brought to trial. Even when former Governor Ernest Vandiver claimed that the sit-ins were a violation of state and private property laws, this did not deter the students from continuing their work.

During this time, students of the AUC came together to develop strategies on boycott and lunch counter sit-ins, which lead to the formation of the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR). Several committees were responsible for various

31 Lefever, 36.
projects to facilitate the movement. They organized the committee on March 16, 1960. Their headquarters of COAHR was at the basement of Rush Memorial Congregational Church, located on Chestnut Street (now known as Brawley Street), which was a convenient location to all students in the AUC. At this location, the COAHR strategically planned several projects such as attempting to increase black employment in white establishments. They facilitated this goal by picketing at food stores that had a large black clientele, but did not hire blacks above menial level. As their first action towards this new goal, the organization picketed and boycotted the two Atlantic & Pacific (A&P) supermarkets. However, even after several days of picketing and boycotting, the A&P officials refused to recognize COAHR as a legitimate bargaining agent and determined not to give in to the boycott, even if their store lost profits. Also, they boycotted the department store, Richie’s, after the president rejected them during a meeting. He claimed that they should give up their fight. When they stated how they would also boycott against him, he replied, “I don’t need Negro trade!” Moreover, they urged black churches to support their efforts and published a weekly news sheet that eventually became a full fledge weekly newspaper.33

They conducted another protest to celebrate the Supreme Court’s sixth anniversary of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision on May 17, 1960. They gathered 1,400 students together to march on the state capital in downtown Atlanta. Unfortunately, the march was diverted by Atlanta’s Chief of Police to prevent the students from gathering at the capital. As the students approached within two blocks of

32 Mason, 97.

33 Walker, 102.
the capital, Police Chief Jenkins and his troops diverted the marchers. Although Chief Jenkins sympathized with the marchers, he was acting upon the orders of Governor Vandiver who opposed their actions and “was fearful of what could happen if a few thousand students crowded onto the capitol grounds.”34 With little opposition, the students continued to march towards Wheat Street Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, where Martin Luther King, Jr. waited to give the students words of encouragement. This caused tension to remain high in the city, causing black Atlanta leaders to show unity and extend assistance to COAHR. Thus, the formation of the Student-Adult Liaison Committee developed. The purpose of the committee was to bridge the gap between students and the larger black and white communities, whose members included business leaders, college presidents, college faculty, ministers, lawyers, and students.35 While some members of COAHR were hesitant regarding the formation of this committee, they still participated. However, they did not allow adult members of the committee to attend policy and strategy meetings of COAHR.

Again, these new changes did not hinder the students from continuing to fight for social justice. Their determination caused some students to stay in Atlanta during the summer of 1960 to continue working to ensure they could continue with their fight when students returned from summer vacation. During their strategy meetings, their new targets for sit-ins were all the popular eating places at Riche’s Department store downtown. They chose Riche’s because it was the one of the largest department stores at that time. Thus, if they could slow the economic progress of Rich’s, then all other

34 Lefever, 48.
35 Ibid., 51.
department stores would take a serious note. Once the fall semester of 1960 started, they had another phase of sit-ins on October 19, 1960. On this date, several hundred students sat in and/or picketed the Atlanta Police Station on Decatur Street and eight downtown segregated businesses. Similar to the first phase of sit-ins, a large number of demonstrators were arrested. What was unique about this particular demonstration was that the leaders decided to invite Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to this demonstration. Fifty-one (52) demonstrators were arrested with King during this demonstration. King and some students refused to leave jail on bail. In fact, out of the fifty-two (52) arrested, fourteen (14) refused to post bond and were sent to jail. This was later noted as the "jail no bail" policy, whose purpose was intended to shed light on the unjust government system as well as put pressure on the Atlanta police and prison system. At this point they asked the Mayor a 30-day truce period which he promised to try to reach a settlement of the dispute, which was granted to them. Unfortunately, the Mayor was unable to negotiate because of disagreements between black leaders and white merchants.

A month later, November 25, 1960, the students planned another phase of sit-ins as well as a full-scale boycott of the downtown Atlanta shopping area. This continued for several months, during which time most of the lunch counters remained closed and the boycott of the downtown stores remained in effect. For several months, they continued to conduct sit-ins at lunch counters all over the city without any arrests. However, on February 7, 1961, a restaurant manager in a federal office building invoked the trespass law, causing the demonstrators to be arrested. Like before, the students refused bail. They

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36 Lefever, 54.

37 Walker, 103.
planned a protest march and rally in front of the jail on February 19, 1961. The community leaders feared that demonstrations would eventually result in a riot. With that in mind, student leaders turned to older black leaders who were able to utilize friendships they had with influential white leaders. Due to the relationships they had with these leaders, the negotiations started that would lead to the settlement of the controversy. On March 7, 1961, the black community and white merchants created an agreement announcing the desegregation of the lunch counters. The counters were actually desegregated on September 27, 1961. Thus, the student sit-in protests opened a new pathway through which these young black students could express their demands for equality.

The Face of Activism

The sit-in movements across the southeast during the 1960s brought a new face to Civil Rights activism. Before this time, most of the activism was coordinated by older, prominent leaders of the community. However, many times historians overlook the black students as the new face of political activism. Many scholars argue that the sit-in movements during the 1960s had more historical significance because of it incorporated college students. This research provides evidence of that assessment. The face of activism changed during this era. In fact, instead of viewing black activism as an activity planned by black churches and organizations, America started realizing that college students could participate in forms of political activism. While black churches and organizations still were a major institutional force behind the Civil Rights movement, the colleges and universities started to infiltrate into the movement as well. Before their participation, black students were almost invisible. However, the sit-in movements forced America to
see and hear the voice of black college students. The students made themselves known by Civil Rights leaders, state legislatures, and their respective communities unlike any time before. Thus, during this time, these college students altered the perception of a typical political activist.

While the face of activism changed in terms of age, the image still portrays the black male students. Historians tend to focus on this era from a male-centered perspective. For example, many highlight the four black male students who took a stand against racial inequality. Yet history does not give us the face of the black female students who may have participated in the same capacity. Most of the student leaders mentioned are men. While this era allowed black college students to be visible within the movement, it disregards the black female college students. Thus, this perpetrates the idea that the face of activism is male. More often the contributions of the black female students are disregarded or included in the mass. Their experiences as black female students will always separate them from the general population. Their activism incorporates the fights against racial as well as gender inequalities. Black women activists point to the gender inequalities that took place within organizations and participation.

The black female students dropped off in Atlanta by their mothers did not foreshadow their involvement in the sit-in protests during this era. Their mothers may have brought their daughters to college in an attempt to give them the education they deserved in order to survive. However, the black female students received an education that extended beyond the classroom. Their activism may have heightened their understanding of race, gender, and class. Consequently, these women are rarely
mentioned within the scholarship. Yet their involvement would also alter the face of activism. Instead of viewing activism in a male-centered manner, political activism needs to extend to include the face of the black female. Her activism will allow the scholarship the opportunity not only to look at her experiences, but to evaluate whether she received the seeds for activism prior to this movement. With that in mind, the face of activism becomes the black woman whose political contributions remain a legacy for future black women activists.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants of this research were African-American women who participated in the Atlanta University Student movement between 1960 and 1961. The six participants in this research played various roles within the movement. Qualitative methodology through the use of case study and oral narrative analysis was utilized in this research. The researcher asked each participant a series of open-ended questions relating to activism and their maternal figures. These open-ended questions allowed the activists to tell their story regarding their mother’s influence as well as their roles during the Atlanta University Center student protest. The goal of this chapter is to analyze how the research data addresses the research questions as well as present material related to this research regarding black women activists and their maternal figures. After completing the data analysis, this chapter will highlight the results of that analysis and provide a discussion regarding the findings. This chapter will highlight the findings and discussion of this research.

The research was completed over a span of two months in Atlanta, Georgia. The participants were initially contacted during the proposal stage. The researcher contacted the librarian at Woodruff Library at the Atlanta University Center in the Archives section to receive the names of the individuals who participated in the AUC student protest that
still lived in Atlanta, Georgia. When the researcher received the list of possible participant’s contact information from the librarian, the researcher sent an email to all the female participants inquiring about their participation in this study. Some participants contacted her via email and telephone to receive more information while other participants agreed upon receiving the email. Once some of the participants received the general information and interview schedule, they agreed to an interview.

After the participants agreed to participate in this study, the researcher conducted the interviews with the participants at various locations such as group meeting rooms in the Woodruff Library on the Atlanta University Center, the conference room in Canterberry Hill Hotel, participant’s offices, and participant’s homes. Location of the interviews was contingent upon the discretion of the participant. Before they conducted the interview, they signed a consent form. One participant showed me pictures of her maternal figures. Some participants asked a few simple questions before the interview was conducted. The interviews were recorded electronically for an average of forty-five (45) minutes. The responses were transcribed by the researcher for data collection.

Data Analysis

Information gathered by interviews and transcripts were performed to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do the political behaviors of African-American women maternal figures influence their daughter’s future political behavior?

2. How, if any, do the political behaviors of African American maternal figures explain the origins of black women activists?

3. How do African-American women engage in politics and activism?
After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher reviewed their responses to assess how the participants responded to the questions highlighted in the interview. Data collection consisted of evaluating how they responded to the questions on the interview schedule in comparison to the research questions. Some major tenants developed based on their responses while other responses highlighted new perspectives not originally addressed in the proposal. First, the researcher tried to find is whether the participants viewed their maternal figures as activist as well as how the participants supported their reason. The second question the researcher attempted to determine whether maternal figures and other factors determine the origin of their activism. The researcher uses the third question as a means of deciphering how the participants engaged in activism.

Each participant’s responses were evaluated separately then collected based on common themes and tenants that rose from all their responses. Based on the responses during the interviews, the researcher decided to answer the first research question by highlighting tenants that describe their maternal figures as it pertains to activism. The second research question was based on whether their maternal figures “passed down” life lessons to the participants that encouraged them to become activists during the 1960s as well as investigate other factors that contributed to the participant’s future activism. The third question was based on how the participants defined activism as well as highlighting the common themes that describe what means the participants participated in activism and politics. However, due to the number of participants, the research cannot make any generalizations. The researcher can only present based on what the participants said.
In what ways, if any, do the political behaviors of African-American women maternal figures influence their daughter’s future political behavior?

Findings

According to the six activist interviewed, three described their maternal figures as activists while three did not label their maternal influences as activists. The three participants that labeled their mothers as activists had an extended understanding of what activism and political behavior consisted. If maternal figures were described as activists, it stemmed from a combination of their maternal figure’s community role, personality, and subtle political activities. The participants who did not view their maternal figures as activists compared their maternal figure’s activism to their activities during the AUC student protest movement. Moreover, these participants argued that their maternal figures were “women of their time”. From their perception, their maternal figures could not be the same activists as the participants because of the historical era they lived, current geographic location, and family obligations. Yet, their actions were categorized as subtle, but still examples of resistance. Therefore, the determining factor for the participants defining their maternal figures as activist was how they personally defined activism. In other words, their perception of their maternal figure’s activism mirrors what they define as activism. If they defined activism in terms of what they did during the 1960s, then they were less likely to view their maternal figures as activists. Yet, if their perception of activism was based in terms of subtle resistance, then they were more likely to describe their maternal figures as activists.

However, all of the participants still defined their maternal figures as “strong black women,” defining them as examples of black womanhood. While all of the
responses regarding their maternal figure’s role as activists varied, they all speak highly of these women. The term “black womanhood” was not frequently used during the course of the interview. Yet they all used terms relating to black womanhood such as “example of womanhood,” “what it meant to be a woman,” and “strong black women.” Specifically, the participants frequently described their maternal figures as the epitome of black womanhood. All the participants claimed that their maternal figures were examples of forerunners by portraying characteristics of a “strong black woman” that later influenced their political behavior. With that in mind, the major determining factor of their maternal figure’s influence was their maternal figure’s character, not necessarily their political actions. They all admired their maternal figures for their strength and exemplifying traits of an activist, even if they did not define their maternal figures as activist. Their maternal figures still were women of resistance, who challenged the power structures in some capacity regardless of socioeconomic status. With that in mind, their maternal figures were examples of what black womanhood encompasses as it relates to political behavior. This research found that black women’s activism is influenced more by their maternal influence’s character than action. Thus, the participants attempted to mirror their maternal figure’s character instead of their behavior.

Regardless of whether or not the participants identified their maternal figures of activists, they all highlight in their responses how their maternal figures were “strong black women.” As mentioned earlier, these maternal figures became the examples of black womanhood. From their responses, black womanhood incorporates tools for future activism. Similar to the forerunners, the women interviewed described their mothers as examples of resistance. They were examples of resistance and the epitome of black
womanhood. Many mention their maternal figures as examples of black womanhood that transcended into their future activism. Moreover, they described certain characteristics of their maternal figures that they incorporated in their activist activities. While each describes their own interpretation of black womanhood, the following tenants mentioned below are common characteristics they all emphasize that encompass black womanhood as it pertains to future activism:

1. **Empowerment**: This tenant refers to an individual who finds that “voice” and encourages others to find that “voice.” Specifically, it refers to a black woman who has a stance or position on a principal as well as advocating for that stance. In other words, their stance is equivalent to their “voice,” which ultimately leads to empowerment. This “voice” is utilized, even if they stand alone. Empowerment encompasses a black woman who believes in something and turns that into action. This is main tenant that maternal figures encouraged. All other tenants are manifestations of this tenant.

2. **Action orientated**: This tenant is utilized as a result of finding that “voice.” Once an individual has found that “voice,” then some action follows. Simply stated, this refers to an individual who is empowered to act. In this research, this describes action with a purpose.

3. **Progressive mentality**: This tenant is defined as a black woman whose mentality is against the norm. It describes an individual who challenges the normal power structure by taking actions (whether overt or subtle) to ensure their “voice” is heard. This tenant is similar to the theory of forerunners presented by Karl Mannihem.
4. **Community oriented:** This tenant refers to a black woman committed to the community. This individual views the community as a family unit, whose needs are as important as their own. They advocate for members in the community in any capacity necessary. Thus, they may participate as community leaders and/or advocates.

5. **Economic empowerment:** This tenant refers to a black woman in charge of her own. She either owns her own business or is in charge of something outside of her household environment. Instead of using their talent for the benefit of others, they utilize their talent for their own profit.

6. **Perseverance:** This tenant describes a black woman exudes perseverance, even during difficult obstacles. It refers to constant determination needed in order to achieve a specific goal, despite the difficulty to achieve the goal. A major component to this tenant includes continual commitment.

7. **Education oriented:** This tenant refers to a black woman who encourages education, whether formal or informal. This person encourages education within her family as well as for herself. From her perspective, education is a means of survival for future generations. In this research, this tenant is manifested within black womanhood regardless of socioeconomic status.

8. **Personal inner strength and work ethic:** This tenet defines a black woman who develops inner strength and manifests that strength through her actions. It refers more to the spiritual and emotional core that is strengthened based on lived experiences. This characteristic usually yielded to a strong work ethic as well.
Discussion

As stated in the findings, the participant’s definition of activism varied based on their perception of activism. Black woman’s scholarship attempts to rigidly define activism. However, the scholarship does not take into consideration the importance of perception in defining activism. Perception often determines how the participants define activism in relation to their maternal figures. The scholarship must answer the question of how black women arrive at their definition of activism. Contrary to the assumption made by the scholarship, black women activism is loosely interpreted based on perception of what activism entails. This is evident in the means in which the participants viewed their maternal figures activism. In this research, the perception of activism varied. While their definitions of activism are similar, their perception of who exudes activism differs. Further investigation showed that black women activists needed to be inquired deeper to interpret why they do or do not define their maternal figures as activists.

If the participant viewed their maternal figures as activist, then it was based on a loose interpretation of what activism entails. For example, one participant defined activism as simply being in action. She saw how her mother was able to work full time, be an active mother for her children, and still have a beautiful physical presence. Therefore, according to this participant, activism is action-based. She states, “My mom is an activist by doing everything that she did... And that was always going against the norm at that time. She was a worker, 40 hours a week, plus, you know, she was a mom, she took care of us, she cooked and did everything in the kitchen. She was amazing. Yeah, she was definitely an activist.” ¹ Another activist in the study viewed her mother as

¹ Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.
an activist based on her mother’s actions with a credit card company. When asked why she defined her mother as an activist, she claims, “My mother was Georgia and not ‘Mrs’… Because, I remember a credit card company, I mean, I was out of college then. So a credit card came with Mrs. Curtis Young. My mother name was different. And she cut it up and sent it back. And said that was not her name.” This participant’s perceives activism as being empowered and progressive. Later in the interview, she describes her mother and grandmother’s political participation in local politics as part of her understanding of activism. She notes, “My mother and my grandmother worked the polls… So, I liked the fact that on voting day, I knew that my mother and my grandmother would be at the voting polls.”

One activist interviewed viewed her mother and grandmother as activists because of their willingness to contribute to the community as well as the value they place on education. Her grandmother was a college graduate, who believed strongly in the value of education. Compared to an activist mentioned above, she describes her mother as an active, talented woman who always encouraged empowerment based on a sense of personal identity. In fact, she describes her mother’s desire to give the children in her father’s school names because she thought it would provide them with a sense of identity that would later motivate them to follow through with their education. The participant describes her father being a principal of a school of black children. Most of their parents did not receive formal education and did not have full names. So their parents would give them initials. However, this participant’s maternal figure decided to provide the children

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2. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

3. Ibid.
names. She describes, “Well anyway, the story I was going to tell you was sometimes these kids would come to school and they would not have names. And so, mother felt like an education—you needed to prepare someone for a better life… And she would help them go and get names.” Furthermore, this same activist described her grandmother as a community leader because her grandmother was one of the first people in her community to go to college. From her perspective, her grandmother was an activist for her role as the community liaison and leader. People looked up to her grandmother and often asked for her assistance with various things. According to her, the black community came to her for help with many issues they could not do themselves:

Because she was educated, people in the community would come to her as well for help for things, even if it was to write a letter to a son or daughter in the service. They were just very community oriented people. Very. They just reached out and were looked upon as leaders. They served as go-betweens to the white community. They had respect. They had the respect of some of the members of the white community, so they would intercede on their behalf… So it was sort of like the village leaders.  

On the other hand, if the participant did not perceive her maternal figure as an activist, it was based on the fact that they were comparing their activist behaviors to their maternal figures. From their perception, activism encompasses a risk-taking behavior similar what they did during the AUC student protest movement. While many of them admired their maternal figures, they also perceived their maternal figures as being “women of their time.” Thus, their maternal figure’s behavior is not perceived as activist behavior. For example, an activist interviewed claimed that no particular woman influenced her activism, but she described her aunts as “strong women.” She did not

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4 Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.

5 Ibid.
describe her maternal figures as activists because they did not engage in activism in the same manner she participated. According to her, activism consists of challenging the system and risk taking. She claims her aunts and grandmother did not attempt to participate in activism in the same manner:

In their own way and in their time, probably. But in the fashion that I did of being a part of a mass movement, no... I think they stood up to their contemporaries who were, you know, mistreating them. Either their employers or whoever. I think they were outspoken. and I think that’s pretty much the most that many of them could do. But I think that most of my aunts—if you infringed upon them in any way, whether you are black, white, whatever, they would in no uncertain terms let you know.6

Another participant highlighted various “rules” that her mother passed down to her. This activist grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia. So, her mother’s “rules” were intended to protect her children in the Jim Crow South. Examples of these “rules” included not using public bathrooms or water fountains if they are marked “colored,” moving off the sidewalk if a White person walked past, not spending patronage at segregated establishments, and completing every task started. However, these rules were intended to keep her children safe, not to challenge the social system. In fact, she described the length her mother went through to protect her brother when they lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee:

When I lived in Chattanooga, when I was very young, somebody—if ever a white person—something happened to a white person, if seen, the black people would talk about them riding around trying to find a black person to arrest... So my brother was eight years old then, he was eight years older... She wouldn’t let him go outdoors. I could remember my brother had to stay in the house and he would argue with my mother, ‘I don’t know why I can’t go outside. I have not done anything wrong. They’re not going to bother me. I haven’t done anything wrong. They’re not going to bother me.’ She said, ‘I know they aren’t going to bother you, because you are not going to be out there.’ She wouldn’t even let him go to school. She said ‘Stay inside until they find somebody because they are looking for somebody to blame that on. And they are going to arrest anybody they see that

6 Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
looks like what the person said. And they won’t arrest you because you won’t be out there until they find somebody.'

However, this same activist described activism as a means advocacy by challenging the system or taking risks at challenging that system. Even with all the “rules” and principals her mother passed down to her, she did not perceive her mother as an activist. Similar to activist mentioned above, she describes her mother as a “woman of her time,” who survived within the existing oppressive power structure. She describes, “My mother designed herself with living in the system, as I reflect on it. She taught us how to stay safe within the existing power structure. She never thought about rocking the boat. If she wanted me to, she didn’t say so because they were fearful of what could happen, they couldn’t find a way to do it.”

Comparatively, another activist interviewed admired her mother’s personal inner strength. Yet she did not consider her mother an activist because she did not consider herself as an activist during the movement. The term “activist” was not a term she would use to describe her activity during this time. Later she recognizes her role as an activist, but that came later in life after she realized the impact the movement had on her activist behavior. Thus, she found it difficult to label her mother as an activist. She claims, “Before I was involved, I had no perception of activism. That’s not even—that activity has never crossed my mind... But, and even then, I wouldn’t have used the term ‘activist’ because I didn’t know there was any such term.” Moreover, this participant describes her mother and aunt as having the characteristics of activists without having a means of

7. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.

8. Ibid.

9. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
manifesting those principals. In fact, she frequently referred to her mother as the quiet, peacemaker while she described her aunt as feisty and defiant. Both were described as the “strong black women.” However they were hindered by the daily reminders of Jim Crow laws in the American South:

With my aunt, it may have been in her genes. But just didn’t have a way of expressing it until she confronted, you know, had the opportunity to confront it. And what I learned about my mother, I always saw her as the humble, quiet, peacemaking one...I think, she had all the makings of an activist, but in a Jim Crow era, you know, where people were getting lynched and all that. That there was no way of expressing it. But when the opportunity came, she did. 10

When she mentions the “opportunity” she is referring to her mother helping members of a local chain gang escape. The participant was unaware of this behavior until she became an adult. According to the participant, her mother as helping the community in whatever capacity was possible. Even after receiving knowledge of this event, she still did not define her mother as an activist:

But um, I was told---I left immediately after I finished and went to California. And I wasn’t aware of this, but there were black men who were working on a chain gang. And so, sometimes they would break away. You know, sometimes if they weren’t looking and they got away. But they had to be—they had to get away fast and not be found. And I was told that my mother hide them away in our house. You know, the ones that had broken off the chain gang and helped them move along. I suppose it was like Harriet in the Underground Railroad. 11

The scholarship of black women’s studies and political science addresses the complexities of African American women and their activist behavior. However, this research is unique because it combines the two scholarships focusing on how the culture of black women affects their level of political participation. Often the scholarship separates the culture aspects from the political and vice versa. Yet this research shows

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.
how these two entities are extensions of one another. In the political science perspective, this research highlights Jewel Prestage's analysis of black women's traditional and nontraditional political behavior. Those participants who viewed their maternal figures as activists viewed political behavior as Prestage's nontraditional political behavior because their behavior may span beyond the "traditional" means of political participation. Participants who did not view their maternal figures as activists viewed their political behavior from a more traditional, Western political perspective. Black women's scholarship highlights the importance of "othermothers" within the black community, but not exactly how is manifested in action past a particular generation. Thus, research highlights how culture affects the political in regards to African-American women's activist behavior. More importantly, the example of Black womanhood becomes an introduction the political obligations of African-American women.

This research compliments the analysis conducted by black women's scholars Gloria Joseph, Jill Lewis, and Patricia Hill Collins regarding the extent African-American culture plays in black mother-daughter relationships. A large aspect highlighted in this research is how African-American culture plays a major part in how black mothers-daughters interact with one another. All the participants acknowledge the importance of their maternal figures in defining for them what it means to be a black woman in America, African perspective regarding community, and the importance of community "othermothers." Moreover, this research evaluates how this relationship extends past the biological mother-daughter relationships. In this research, maternal figures included extended family members such as grandmothers and aunts. No one in this research mentioned women outside of their extended family or women within the community
other than teachers. While their teachers left an impression upon them, they were not regarded in the same manner that Joseph, Lewis, and Collins suggest.

From a sociological perspective, this research provides proof that maternal socialization takes place among African-American maternal figures. Gloria Joseph, Jill Lewis, and Patricia Hill Collins all contend that socialization in this relationship is made through the transmission of knowledge. This can also be referred to as the African principal of “passing down,” which is the most integral aspect of socialization among African-American maternal figures and daughters. The participants in this research all assess that their maternal figures did “pass down” certain rules and lessons that helped shape their future activism. With that in mind, this research highlights how the African principal of “passing down” is utilized as a tool of socialization among African-American maternal figures and daughters. After all, most of the socialization did not happen based on “passing down” principals of black womanhood verbally. Some of the principals were passed down based on the actions of their maternal figures as well.

Moreover, socialization in this research refers to the maternal figure being examples of black womanhood. The comparative analysis conducted by Kathleen Blee’s and Ann Tickamyer concludes how black women immolate their mother’s behavior while white women immolate their mother’s attitudes. This research highlights how they are both applicable in regards to the socialization between black maternal figures and daughters. The participant’s mothers became examples of black womanhood based on their attitudes and actions because both aspects influence how the participants define black womanhood. Similar to Patricia Hill Collin’s analysis, these participant’s maternal figures gave them the tools they needed to “take them anywhere” based on their attitudes
and actions. While participants did not view their maternal figures as activists, they still highlight certain attitudes and actions epitomized black womanhood. These tools were utilized in their future activist activities. Both their maternal figure’s actions and attitudes were passed down to the daughters, causing them to manifest those principals once given the opportunity to in the Atlanta University Center student movement.

Each of the tenants of black womanhood the participants describe is within the black women’s scholarship. Similar to Patricia Hill Collins, this research also incorporates how their maternal figures taught them to fit into the “sexual politics of black womanhood.” 12 Black women scholars typically highlight this principal as a means to explain black woman’s self-identification based on race and gender as well as her placement in society and community. According to the scholarship, these skills were utilized as a means of black women’s survival for future generations. Consequently, this research reveals that these survival skills also transfers into future activism as well. Thus, the “sexual politics of black womanhood” introduced by Collins not only is utilized for black women’s physical survival but their survival as activists as well. The same methods used for physical survival of black women are the same methods black women utilize in activism. This means that survival in terms of the African-American experience is not based on simply physical survival, but political survival as well.

Moreover, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Joseph, and Jill Lewis claims that black maternal figures encourage their daughters to develop the skills they will need to confront oppressive conditions. The participants believe their maternal figures provided them with

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these tools throughout their lives. So, when given the opportunity, the participants utilized those skills in their participation in the AUC student protest. As mentioned earlier, while all the participants had some unique aspects of black womanhood, all of them highlighted the following eight tenants as it relates to their understanding of black womanhood as it pertains to activism: 1) empowerment, 2) action oriented, 3) progressive mentality, 4) community oriented, 5) entrepreneurial spirit, 6) perseverance, 7) education oriented, 8) personal inner strength and work ethic. These tenants are highlighted in black women’s scholarship.

The first tenant of black womanhood is the principal of empowerment, which is defined similar to the idea of “voice throwing” introduced by the African feminist scholar Mary Kolawale. Kolawale speaks of African women on the African continent and their experiences with colonialism. Yet, it also applies to African-American women’s understanding of black womanhood because it describes the result of the increased consciousness of women of African descent. In fact, this concept describes women of African descent taking a stance, even with the social structures that oppressed them trying to suppressing their “voice.” One can argue that colonialism and capitalism both have a challenging affect on women of African descent because they create the social constructs of race and gender. Thus, women of African descent are empowered once they find their “voice” in the midst of an oppressive society. All the participants in this research describe the importance of this principal. Their maternal figures encouraged them to be empowered and utilizing that to help others. For example, one participant mentioned how her parents urged her to have a stance about something and advocate for others. Her parents encouraged her to be empowered and transforming that into action. She states,
“Well my mother and my dad used to both tell me, you know, stand up for what you believe. Foremost, have a belief, a thought, or a position on something… And not just be swayed back and forth but stand at that position. And then support it whichever way you could.” 13

According to another participant, this “voice” came in the form of rules from her mother. Her mother imposed several rules to ensure her daughter’s survival. However, these rules were also an attempt for her to find a sense of empowerment, which was defined by her mother as someone who is an independent thinker and doer. According to her, these rules were also intended to mold and shape her character. Though she did not describe her mother as an activist, her mother taught her be empowered through thought and action. She explains how her mother encouraged her to “commit yourself to something, something with principal, something with self respect and dignity. And you always align yourself with things that make sense. And things that will make contributions to society. And though she never detailed them, she was right.” 14

They describe their maternal figures as being critical of the current social structure, creating that “voice.” However, they did not have the means to manifest that “voice” in the same means the participants did in the movement. While the maternal figures might have been hindered by society to completely utilize this “voice,” the maternal figures still encouraged their daughters to be empowered. Because of this lesson their maternal figures passed down to them, it raised their consciousness regarding black womanhood in America. Therefore, the AUC student movement gave the participants an

13. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

opportunity to utilize their empowerment on behalf of themselves, their maternal figures, and the African-American community. With that in mind, black womanhood incorporates “voice throwing” as a result of African women’s increased consciousnesses. In turn, this unique form of empowerment leads to future activist behaviors among African-American women.

Action is the center of black women’s activism and epistemology. All the participants’ maternal figures encouraged advocacy by continual commitment to the larger community. As mentioned earlier, this concept mirrors the African concept of community being a family. Moreover, they acknowledge the importance of action within activism. This research describes tenant as action with a purpose. The best interpretation of this action orientation is based on two participant’s responses. One participant describes this tenant in detail in regards to her mother’s actions. She saw her mother constantly in action. Not only was her mother in action, it was action with a purpose:

She was just a doer. She was in action all the time. She was a person that was in motion creating all the time. So around the house, I mean, she worked full time, she was a wife, she was a mom, she did all the cooking, she did pretty much all the cleaning, she entertained. So I just saw her as a woman who did everything and did it well and with particular detail.  

Another participant also highlights what being a “doer” entails and how this factor is important when referring to activism. Her maternal figures describe how action can manifest for a larger purpose. She gives a few examples of action with a purpose. She describes, “But the important thing is just do, take action, whether it is writing a letter, marching, getting involved with groups, voting.”  

Black women’s scholars such as the

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15. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

16. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
Cohambee River Collective and Patricia Hill Collins discuss the dialectic relationship between a raise in consciousness and action. However, black women’s scholarship was limited in scope regarding how this relationship transfers past one generation.

This research shows how this dialectic relationship is “passed down” from the maternal figures to the future generation of black women. This is evident because the participant described their maternal figures emphasizing the importance of empowerment and action. In fact, the participants understood black womanhood as incorporating a certain level of action, whether subtle or overt. Moreover, this research highlights how a raise of consciousness is necessary in order to act. According to the participants, both of these entities are necessary in regards to activism. Simply stated, the participants infer that once there’s an increase in black woman’s consciousnesses, she is charged to act upon that conscious-raising. However, they emphasized how their action must have a purpose in order to classify their behavior as activism. Shirley Yee and Jewel Prestage investigate the actual behavior of African American women within their communities. Both highlight the specific actions that African American women participated in despite their historical realities. This research provides similar concrete examples of the actions that the participant’s maternal figures participated such as participating during voting day, formal education of members in the community, taking small legal actions on behalf of the community, and their participation within the black church.

The tenant of progressive mentality is similar to the forerunner’s theory presented as the conceptual framework of this research. Karl Mannheim describes in his theory of forerunners that if the older generational unit were forerunners, then the newer generational set will hold on to their ideologies, becoming forerunners themselves. The
forerunners in the older generation are classified as progressive, which is carried over to
the newer generation. The participants mentioned their maternal figures as progressive
thinkers always critical of the social structures, even if they were unable to manifest that
in action. For example one participant describes her mother’s subtle action that showed
her progressive mentality, challenging the sexist power structures regarding naming after
marriage. In fact, she was progressive because her name was not determined by her
husband or ex-husband. Her mother was determined to let others know her name, not just
who she was married to. This was progressive because her mother did not believe her
identity was determined by marriage like the marriage laws at that time suggest. Marriage
laws at that time were patriarchal. So when a woman was addressed, it was usually by her
husband’s name, not her own. This participant’s mother was determined not to allow
marriage to strip her of her identity. She states, “I remember a credit card company... a
credit card came with Mrs. Curtis Young. My mother name was different. And she cut it
up and sent it back. And said that was not her name.” 17 While this was mentioned earlier,
this quote also falls under this tenet because it describes her progressive mentality.

Another participant highlighted this tenant by referring to her mother’s
progressive mentality and action. She describes her mother as going against the norm for
a black woman at that time. Not only did her mother have an “action centered”
perspective, she her actions were progressive. She worked full time outside of the home
at a local college. Most women during that time may have worked, but as domestic
workers or entrepreneurs. Her mother was formally educated and worked in a university
setting while also upholding her responsibilities as a mother. She explains, “My mom is

17. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
an activist by doing everything that she did. And that was always going against the norm at that time. She was a worker, 40 hours a week, plus, you know, she was a mom, she took care of us, she cooked and did everything in the kitchen. She was amazing.”

The same progressive mentality the participant’s maternal figures raised their consciousnesses regarding black womanhood. Comparatively, the theory of the forerunners suggest that if the older generation units were progressive, then the newer generation to be progressive as well. The theory also suggests that one generation is simply an extension of the next. This research provides validity to that assessment. The participant’s described their maternal figures as progressive, challenging the societal structure in some capacity. While some could not physically challenge the system, they were critical of their lived experiences with racism and sexism. Mannihem assesses that the only difference between the generations is the actual manifestations of the progressive mentality. In other words, he assess that the new generations simply react to their historical realities differently than older generations. This research provides validity to this concept as well based on the fact that they adopted their maternal figures’ progressive mentality and turning that progressive mentality into action once they received the opportunity to participate in the AUC student movement. Thus, according to the participants, black womanhood incorporates progressive mentality and action.

Participants argued that an example of black womanhood is an individual who is active within their communities. More importantly, the participants could refer to at least one maternal figure in their lives that were community oriented individuals. As mentioned earlier, their maternal figures participated in the community in some capacity.

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18. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.
Most of the participation took place in the church, but some mention their maternal figures being educators and voters. One activist describes her mother and grandmother community leaders who did what they could to meet the needs of the community. She describes, "When they saw a need in the community that they could address, they did. And uh, it was—sometimes it was just, food for the hungry... They were just very community oriented people." 19

Further in the interview, this participant describes how her father’s aunts always helped in the community, even if they did not have much themselves. She recalls her aunts putting her to work in the community as soon as she came to visit. However, she realized that there was a level of expectation associated with helping members within the community. Thus, they passed down the importance of community by their actions. This participant realized how community works, no matter how subtle it appeared, were an essential role the black women in the community played. In turn, this helped her realize that black womanhood incorporates this tenant:

I just assumed that was the way it was supposed to be. I just thought you were supposed to help. And not only did I think it, I was taken along for the ride as a child... but my aunt—as soon as we—it seemed like as soon as we get there, she would say, ‘um call Ms. so-in-so, I heard she’s been ill.’... And I would call, I wouldn’t know her from—and then she would say ‘I fixed some food, I want you to take it to her.’ It was just expected that you were to help other people who were less fortunate. That was expected. 20

Participants all mentioned how the church played a major role in their maternal figure’s community participation in some method. An activist in this research also highlights how her aunts were extremely involved in the church and the community within the church:

19. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.

20. Ibid.
I have an aunt, even to this day, who still, though she is in her late 80s cares for elderly people. And she often said she wished...that she had a one seated car because she’s always asked to drive people around. And she would go to the nursing homes. Um, and so, yes, they did those. But the others mostly in church. And maybe community-based, you know, like within their little neighborhoods and those kinds of things which I think were important. And looking after other people’s children, you know, things like that, whether they were in the neighborhood or family. So therefore, nurturing and teaching in those fashions.  

Clenora Hudson-Weem’s analysis of Africana Womanism places the black family at the center of black womanhood. She describes mothering and nurturing within her tenants of Africana Womanism. Commitment to community is incorporated under this tenant, emphasizing how Africana womanist is committed to her own family that extends to the entire Africana family. The participants describe black womanhood in a similar manner by describing this individual who views the family and community as a top priority. They infer that the community is an extended family. For example, one participant mentioned how the community was the church. Even though they were not blood related to the people in the church and community, they are still perceived as family. They were the top priority. In fact, she saw it as a “tradition” that was passed down to her by the women in her life. She explains, “We were brought up in the church. So the most generous people I ever seen were those people in those small churches helping other people. And they didn’t have much themselves. But that’s how I grew up. And I have kept that tradition alive.”  

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21. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.


23. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
Moreover, Nancy Naples describes how this protection extends outside of family into the community in her analysis of “activist mothering.” Black womanhood incorporates motherhood in relation to the community. Thus, the same protection the maternal figures and participants had for their immediate family transcended to the community. Black women’s scholarship highlights the significance of the “othermothers” in the black community as being community caretakers. This remains evident with this research as well. Some participants highlighted their maternal figure’s participation in the community as caretakers. For example, one participant mentions her aunts taking the role as “othermothers” for members in the community. She describes how these activities were “community-based, you know, like within their little neighborhoods and those kinds of things which I think were important. And looking after other people’s children. You know, things like that. Whether they were in the neighborhood or family. So therefore, nurturing and teaching in those fashions.” 24 These behaviors acted as nonverbal communication between maternal figure and daughter regarding the importance of community because the level of care their maternal figures showed their communities later became the foundation for their activities in the AUC student movement.

Many of the participants mentioned the entrepreneurial spirit their maternal figures exuded by owning their own businesses or owning something outside of the household. The participants admired their maternal figures for creating something of their own, not relying on anyone to survive economically. In a segregated environment, especially in Atlanta, Georgia, African-American people attempted to develop their own businesses to serve the needs of their particular community. Before integration, the black

24 Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
community thrived from black businesses. One participant who grew up in Atlanta details the economic prosperity of African-American people in Atlanta, Georgia even with segregation. African-Americans relied on each other for social interactions and economic survival:

Because, you know in Atlanta, we were segregated so we had such a strong middle class and a strong community of black people that it just didn’t dawn on me that all of this was out there that I didn’t know about. I mean, we knew each other, had our own businesses, so it was really great...it was just a wonderful—I just basically a college brat and experienced so many wonderful things participating at events at Morehouse and Spellman and Morris Brown and Clark. It was just a wonderful life.  

While all of participants mention their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers who owned their own businesses, this particular participant grew up in a household where both of her parents were entrepreneurs in Atlanta, Georgia. While she describes her mother as a stay at home mom, she owned her own successful beauty salon based from her home. Her mother owned her own beauty salon that was attached to the family’s home while her father owned several businesses attached to the home as well:

It was a house and a half. Like I said, it was an actual store like here (indicating on table where the store was) and it covered two streets because on one street facing Frazier Street was the entrance to our house. Right at the corner, at an angle was the entrance into the store. Around the corner on Lewis Street was an entrance to what was my mother’s beauty shop. And the interesting thing was that all of these entrances from the stores actually had doors that connected to the house... So my mother could work in the beauty shop and have somebody man the store because my dad was all out doing other stuff.  

This entrepreneurial mentality spanned outside of Atlanta, Georgia. While it was evident in this city, African-American people were entrepreneurs in other areas of the United States. For example, one activist describes her mother’s nursery school in Gary,

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25. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

26. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
Indiana. She states, “My mother always owned a business. She owned the second oldest nursing school in Gary, Indiana.” 27 Another activist in this study had a great aunt owned her own hair care company in Detroit, Michigan. She admired how her aunt used her creative spirit to develop a successful business. According to this activist, “She was also an influence in that she taught me that you can just create anything you wanted to create because she did by getting out there and starting her business.” 28

The responses under this tenant are similar to the research presented by Kathleen Blee’s and Ann Tickamyer regarding the socialization of African-American women and the transmission of gender role attitudes. In fact, Blee and Tickamyer describe how the mother’s employment is a major component in determining their daughter’s sex-role attitudes. Because some of the participants admired their maternal figures for being entrepreneurs, they believed that this aspect is incorporated in black womanhood as well. For example, one participant describes how her mother owning a business as imperative for her example of black womanhood:

You can only say she passed down an example of a black woman having her own business and never working for anyone. As far as you’ve ever seen, everybody’s mother had a job with someone. My mom owned something. My mom always owned something. Everything was from herself. So you already knew that your mother was in charge. 29

Like Blee and Tickamyer suggest, the participant’s maternal figures work ethic had a significant impact upon their sex-role attitudes. This research provides evidence that entrepreneurship has the same affect on the participant’s idea of black womanhood.

27. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

28. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

29. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
According to the participants, this tenant is essential to black womanhood because it challenges traditional gender roles. Clenora Hudson Weems’s tenant of Africana womanism that incorporates flexible roles assesses that Africana women’s gender role has not been clearly defined. Hudson Weems argues that feminist scholarship relies on analysis such as Blee and Tickamyer’s regarding gender roles. She argues that Africana women believe and respect traditional roles, even though the roles have not been clearly defined by Africana men or women, causing the roles to be somewhat relaxed. Hudson-Weems argues that black women have always challenged the gender roles because of their roles during American slavery. However, the participants highlight a limitation of this analysis. Consequently, the participants in this research expand that assessment in their responses by describing how gender roles incorporate other unique qualities such as entrepreneurship. They saw entrepreneurship as challenging gender roles of black women because the black women claimed ownership of their labor.

The participants witnessed their maternal figure’s perseverance and determination to reach a goal. Their maternal figures urged the participants to incorporate this within their lives whether through their educational or personal endeavors. Commitment was a major component of this tenant. If a goal was set, then the mission must be completed. Two activists described this tenant in detail. One participant describes how her mother encouraged her to have perseverance in whatever she did. Her maternal figure “passed down” this notion of determination and perseverance that manifested once she participated in the movement. The purpose of perseverance was not for the benefit of self, but for the betterment of the community:

And so, in the background of my being in the movement, was this support from her that I could do it, that it can be done, that however long it takes, do it. The perseverance, the stick-to-itness, and the commitment to do it... She taught me not just be in this little lane here, but to expand it and be parts of groups be the young force, committed to make a difference wherever I could make a difference.31

Another activist’s mother urged this tenant of perseverance by encouraging her to finish what she started, regardless of the challenges. In fact, she mentioned that this was one of their “rules” that you must finish what you start. While they did not use the terminology, her “rules” plants seeds of perseverance:

Because my mother had this rule, that anything you started, you finished. So if you were going to college, you understood that you were going to finish. You started sowing a blouse, you start looking at it thinking it’s going to turn out ugly, but no no, you had to finish. Everything you start, that was a rule. You make a decision before you start something: ‘Are you going to finish it?’ If you can’t, you don’t start.32

Comparatively, Cheryl Rodriguez’s analysis highlights how activists witness their maternal figures perseverance and determination. In fact, the development of black feminist or womanist intellectuals and creative thinkers can be traced directly to the persistent and vigilant encouragement of grandmothers, mothers, and other women in their childhood communities. With that in mind, the participants also describe how the development of their activist activities stemmed from their maternal figure’s teaching them perseverance and determination. From their perspective, perseverance relates to black womanhood and activism as well. Thus, the participants in this research also highlight the validity of this particular assessment from Rodriguez.

31. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.
32. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
According to the participants, many of the maternal figures pushed for formal education regardless of socioeconomic status. For example, one activist’s mother was a domestic worker who did not receive a high school diploma until later in life. Yet, she recalls that her mother always urged the importance of education because her mother wanted her children to have the same advantages as her brother who attended Morehouse College. Her family grew up in a lower, working class setting, living in government housing. With that in mind, her mother viewed college as a means for her children to achieve a better life and a means of survival. So, instead of challenging the system, her mother encouraged her children to focus on receiving knowledge and utilizing education as a means of safe resistance. The participant describes how her mother would emphasize the importance of a college education and how this principal was embedded within her:

And my mother—I already knew about college because my mother’s brother had graduated from Morehouse before I was born and he was working at North Carolina Central and worked at Bishop College as a minister, professor of economics and he was working at North Carolina Central, had his doctorate. We saw Uncle Neal had a car, we don’t have a car. She would say, ‘You know, your Uncle Neal went to College.’ She would never say ‘You have to go to college.’ But everything we asked for, he had. So she would remind you, ‘He went to college.’ So I knew about college, you had to go to college to succeed. It was like planting a seed in the mind of a child. My sister knew she was going to, my brother knew he was going to college. We knew we were going to college...My mom knew that education was going to be very, very, very important. You know? And she knew that one of the ways out poverty and whatever problems there were forming for our people that the way—one of the ways—was to get an education.

Another participant admired her grandmother for being one of the first African-American women in her area to graduate from college. In fact, her grandmother became an example of how education was meant to assist members of the community who could not receive

33. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
formal education. This is similar to the theory of “afritics,” which Elice E. Rogers describes as an African perspective on politics in which education and political attainment was not for the betterment of the individual, but for the community. As an individual climbs up by obtaining education, they bring up the members of their communities as well. Thus, the purpose of educational attainment was to assist their communities. One activist highlights what her grandmother’s education meant for others:

My grandmother was a great influence in my life. She was a college graduate... she finished at Bishop College back in the day. And was a strong black woman... But um, because she was educated, people in the community would come to her as well for help for things, even if it was to write a letter to a son or daughter in the service. They just reached out and were looked upon as leaders. 34

Similar to Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis’ assessment, education becomes a means of survival for African American women that mothers impose upon their daughters. For black maternal figures, education becomes a key for a survival by ensuring that they receive a better life. Knowledge became acknowledged as a necessary tool for survival. Even from slavery, African-American people argue that knowledge is one tool that society cannot take. Comparatively, this research highlights how the maternal figures encouraged education and knowledge as tools to combat the oppressions their communities faced. In fact, those maternal figures that received formal education were uplifted as pillars of their communities, becoming community leaders. If the maternal figure did not receive formal education, she still urged the participant to attend school so they can have a better economic situation. However, the participants did not only view education as a means of survival, they viewed it as a means of resistance. With that in mind, a tenant of black woman is an individual who encourages education. The purpose of education was not limited as a means of receiving financial security. In

34. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
fact, education expanded to using that knowledge to facilitate change within the black community.

Maternal figures were constantly referred as examples of strength by the participants. According to the participants, personal inner strength became an essential tenant. This stems from their understanding of the internal strength their maternal figures exuded. Personal strength does not refer to physical strength, but spiritual and emotional strength. For example, one activist refers to her aunts and grandmother as “strong black women”. When her parents divorced, she grew up with father. So, even though she did not grow up with her mother, she still received great examples of womanhood through her aunts and grandmother. In fact, she describes them as the epitome of the “strong woman”, even if they were unable to manifest it in the same manner she did during the movement. She states, “I have very strong aunts… Who always worked hard and encouraged you, well me, to work hard. Uh, we had a very strong grandmother influence.” 35 Another activist mentioned her mother’s inner strength displayed by her peaceful nature. Even though she did not label her mother as an activist, she claims that her mother portrayed strength through her character. She tried to mimic her mother’s peaceful, inner strength. She often referred to her mother’s personal, inner strength as the calm peacemaker that was manifested through her kindness towards others. This activist often referred to herself as being hostile and anxious, but she wanted to be like her mother whose personal strength was defined as someone having a peaceful demeanor. She describes that her mother’s inner strength stemmed from a strong spiritual foundation:

35. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
I always said I wish I could be like my mother. There was nothing that I thought my mother lacked... just to the peace and calmness that she had about it. Like, I can see when I get in a situation it seems like it takes so much anxiety and uh, I never saw this in my mother, period. And I know she had a lot of things to go through as an adult that she had to tolerate. And I never saw anything but peace and love and kindness in my mother.  

A third participant also used the term “strong black woman” to describe the maternal figures in her life as it relates to activism. She used this term to describe her grandmother because of their educational attainment. Furthermore, she perceived all the women in her life as strong black women for the roles they played in their communities. She describes how her grandmother “finished at Bishop College back in the day. And was a strong black woman. I had strong black women on both sides, on my father’s side and my mother’s side.

LaVerne Gyant conducted research on black women activists who participated during the Civil Rights Movement. In her assessment, activists constantly speak of this “strength” their grandmothers and mothers exuded through their actions. They spoke of the strength that their mothers and grandmothers demonstrated in fighting the everyday battles of oppression, racism, and sexism as well as their efforts to provide them with better opportunities. The participants in this research also described this assessment when they defined the maternal figures in their lives as “strong black women”. According to Clenora Hudson Weems, strength is one of the tenants for Africana womanism as well. Hudson Weems highlights the physical and psychological strength of Africana women because they endured harsh historical realities throughout several generations. The

36. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
37. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
participants recognized this personal strength within their maternal figures as well because they witnessed their maternal figures survive and raise children despite the plights with racism, sexism, and classism.

*How, if any, do the political behaviors of African American maternal figures explain the origins of black women activists?*

**Findings**

The research found that maternal figures are not the only factor in determining the origins of black women’s activism. However, their influence remains significant to explain the origins of black women activists in terms of “passing down” this notion of black womanhood as it pertains to activism. Maternal influences “pass down” this idea of black womanhood through the lessons they taught their daughters. Many participants highlighted how her maternal figures “passed down” this idea of challenging the system by encouraging them to adopt the tenants mentioned above. Based on this research, certain factors significantly contribute to the origin of African American women’s activism. While their maternal figures “passed down” this notion of activism by being an example of black womanhood, geographic location played a major factor in explaining the origin of their activism.

Geographic location contributes to the origin of black women’s activism more if they spent their childhood in the American South. Five out of the six the participants grew up in the American South prior to attending college. Due to Jim Crow regulations, the participants witnessed in their childhood how racism affected their daily lives. Their childhood experiences in the American South increased the participant’s consciousness
regarding racism in America. For example, three out of the six participants recalls family members being referred to outside of their name from White people, regardless of their age or socioeconomic status. Their revolutionary consciousness increased based on their childhood experiences in the American South.

Yet, this was also in conjunction with the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s, the increased mobilization of the Civil Rights era, and the start of various student sit-in movements provided them an outlet to express their discontentment with the racism they faced prior to attending college. Therefore, the participants state how the origins of their activism stemmed from the example of black womanhood, the maternal figure presented, geographic location, and childhood experiences prior to attending college (or lack thereof). All these factors raised their consciousness regarding the affects of racism in America. Thus, when the AUC student movement began to mobilize, the participants found a means of expressing their concerns in a nonviolent manner.

**Discussion**

Gloria Joseph, Jill Lewis, and Patricia Hill Collins explain how black mother-daughter relationships are utilized to help future generations survive within their historical realities. As stated earlier, they infer that a “passing down” is taking place between mother and daughter. However, this research focuses specifically on this notion of “passing down” black womanhood as it pertains to activism. One participant mentions how her aunts were examples of “strong women” but did not pass down this notion of activism. Consequently, she states how they passed down this notion of a “strong black woman” through their progressive mentality, urging her to do the same. They verbally criticized the system, even they were unable to do so. However, they encouraged her
align with people who were doing something progressive with their lives. She claims how her maternal figures “were much older, you know, in generations before. I think they questioned and talked about our society and encouraged whatever could be done. And noted to me, or pointed out to me, people who were trying to do things.”

Another activist’s maternal figure also urged her to align herself with people who believed what she believed. This “rule” was imperative within her household, especially as it pertains to education. She describes various “rules” that were means of passing down this notion of black womanhood. However, this rule coincides with what the participant above mentioned. They desired their children to involve themselves in worthy actions in order to fight against the oppressive nature of racism. Perhaps this was the first push towards collective action that they later participated in during the AUC student movement. The maternal figures inferred that once a black woman is empowered, she works with others who are empowered as well. This “rule” was passed down, planting a seed for this participant’s future activism:

And um, aligning yourself with what people are doing things that you believe are right. My parents were real picky about the company that I kept. They wanted to know where I was and what I was doing. And that was very important at that time. You know?... And you were taught to align yourself with people who had definite goals and knew where they were going.

Another participant acknowledged how her mother did not necessarily “pass down” this notion of activism. Her mother “passed down” this idea of black womanhood in regards to her entrepreneurial spirit. Similar to the previous participants, her mother

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38. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

39. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
planted the seed that manifested later in her life. The participant recognized how her mother owned her own labor. This caused an increased consciousness regarding the importance of ownership to help her community. In fact, the entrepreneurial spirit did not belong to the individual, but to uplift the community, providing them with their needs. While this quote was presented earlier, it is relevant for this idea of “passing down” tools for future activism:

Well you can’t say that she passed down activism. You can only say she passed down an example of a black woman having her own business and never working for anyone. As far as you’ve ever seen, everybody’s mother had a job with someone. My mom owned something. My mom always owned something. Everything was from herself. 40

One activist in this research admired her mother for her peace, calm, non-confrontational nature. While she did not define her mother as an activist, she claims her mother did not lack anything. In fact, she looked up to her mother because of that personal strength she exuded. While her mother was aware of her and her sister’s involvement in the movement, she did not stop them from participating. She described her mother has having a strong spiritual foundation, causing her to remain peaceful even when she knew her daughters were participating in the movement. Similar to the participants mentioned above, her maternal figure may have not passed down this notion of activism, but passed down this idea of what it means to be a calm, peaceful woman in the face of adversity.

This became her motivation for future activist activities:

I usually take my committee notes, my class notes. And my mother must’ve known that, she—and I didn’t know, she wrote a note in it and I didn’t know it until I was at school the next day. And she said, ‘You are fortunate enough’—Ruby Doris and me. She was talking to both of us—‘To have a mother who would like to know where you are sometimes.’ It was something like please acknowledge—please let me know something. Let me know that you are okay... she didn’t confront me. She just wrote it down, you know? But she was never

40 Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
confrontational about anything. And I think because she prayed a lot and that gave her a kind of calmness and peace. Like 'Lord, I put them in your hands.' And she manifests that. And I always wish—now that’s the kind of peace that I strive for. Even in the last two weeks I have come forth with you know, scripture readings and everything to try to achieve a peace in my life. You know, with all this going on. So to me, my mother has always been somebody to look up to. And she didn’t lack in anything. And certainly because she was not considered an activist.

As stated earlier, for black women physical survival is equivalent to survival as an activist. Thus, the intent of the tenants for black womanhood was to ensure that the participants survived as activists. Most of the participants describe their maternal figures as being examples of what an activist entails. Maternal figures may have verbally challenged the social system causing them to be forerunners. Yet, it was unlikely that their words translated into action. So, according to the participants, their maternal figures challenged them to be a “strong black woman” by giving them the tools they needed in order to fight against the oppressive system in the future. Thus, their maternal figures’ passing down this notion of black womanhood was merely a tool to combat the social injustices they experienced throughout their childhood. These tools became relevant for their future activism. Thus, maternal figure’s role in explaining the origins of black women activism is simply by their example of black womanhood, providing future generations with the tools they need to combat future social injustices.

The Atlanta University Center student movement relied on a militant, youthful spirit to mobilize the movement. In fact, the movement became the participant’s first major activist activity. More importantly, this movement became the manifestation of revolutionary consciousness. Margo V. Perkins describes how the origin of black women activism stems from a revolutionary consciousness by identifying how the personal

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41 Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
becomes political. Similar to this research, Perkins claims how revolutionary consciousnesses can be heard by the writers retelling of significant, early personal experiences that both reshaped their understanding of the dynamics of race, class, and gender oppression in America and motivated their eventual involvement in the political struggle. However, Perkins did not evaluate how location also plays a role in developing this consciousness among African-American women. With that in mind, this research emphasizes how this revolutionary consciousness was developed based on childhood experiences in certain geographic locations.

The majority of the participants in this research spent their childhood in the America South, with the pressures of Jim Crow. Most black feminist scholars do not take into consideration how the geographic location influences future activism. However, all of the participants in this research recognized how daily experiences with Jim Crow influenced their perception of racism in America. They would mention daily inconveniences' due to Jim Crow regulations. In fact, all of the participants grew up in the South except for one participant who grew up in Gary, Indiana. However, when she relocated to Atlanta, Georgia to attend college, she realized what it meant to be a black woman in America. Once she came to the American South, racism became a reality within her life. Thus, this participant’s experience with racism was actually manifested through a change in location:

I was forced to, so to speak, to come South. It was good for me... But when I arrived, I saw a sign at the train station that said ‘For Colored’ and ‘White’. So, I didn't think I was colored. I have not been called that or I identified with ‘Colored’. By the time I came along, we were Negros... So, I saw the white sign and there was no jitney to pick me up. And my mother said that when you get off

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the train, go get in the jitney and tell them you are going to Spelman College. And so, I was trying to follow her instructions but when I got off the train, my bags, there was no car. So, as I proceeded to the white waiting room, I heard someone call me. And the girl called me, still living to this day, said—she wanted to know where I was going and I told her I wanted to find out about the car. And she said, ‘You can’t go in there because that’s the white waiting room.’... So uh, I went over on Spelman’s campus, got myself acclimated, only to find out that I couldn’t go to Woolworth’s counter and get a hotdog. Because I had to go—they didn’t serve hotdogs to black people at the Woolworths. I thank my mother for covering me. But I was also upset that I didn’t know. I was just really unhappy that I didn’t know what it meant to be black in America. Or what it meant to be a black child... So you’re telling me now that I can’t talk to those people because I am black? And I don’t know I’m black. I don’t know what I am, because now I’m in the South.43

On the other hand, another activist mentioned how Jim Crow caused inconveniences shopping. This participant grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, where her parents were successful entrepreneurs. Yet, they still experienced certain aspects of racism as well regardless of their socioeconomic status. According to her, all of her childhood was spent attempting to survive in the Jim Crow South. She recalls how several instances she experienced with racism prior to the movement that caused her to become involved:

Subtle things like, um, I know when we had gone downtown to shop...when we had to go in to buy shoes but you had to go all the way to the back and sit. No one would see you sitting back there in the corner to try on shoes. I remember having to do that, to walk all the way to the back. And I mean, that’s the way life was, sort of. I also remember being disturbed as I got to be like a thirteen year old that there was only one shade of stockings for dark people. And there was something—but everybody had to buy it—and it was an ugly shade. It was like a reddish brown. And uh, I know what we would do is buy the lighter stockings and take them home and put them in coffee. Coffee. Something that made it turn darker or another shade or something. I mean, you had to accommodate like that. The makeup was nothing—you’d be scared to put it on because it would make you look white and all of that. It was those inconveniences like that even in the cosmetics and the stockings, and I don’t know, things like that. So all of that made me know—you know—we were different. So they weren’t providing for us and

43. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
for our needs and things that we wanted that made us enhance our beauty and so forth.44

Another Atlanta native participant recalls incidents with public transportation. Later, she mentions how this particular incident invoked a nonviolent protest on the bus when she was in high school. Before that occurred, she vividly describes the public transportation conditions in Atlanta, Georgia. This incident left a lasting impression upon her because she realized the lengths that others would go through to separate themselves from African-American people. After realizing what was taking place, her peers and her who rode that bus later decided to work collectively to combat the situation. Before that, she describes daily reminder of racism by describing the conditions with public transportation in Atlanta, Georgia:

I lived off Prior Road, in the Carver Homes apartments. At that time it was government housing. And um, coming to Spelman, I had to ride two buses. I had to ride the Prior Road bus, to the downtown Atlanta transfer and get the bus that would bring me to Spelman. And most days, I stood up all the way because white people would be on the buses. So, there was a bus line, the Prior Street bus line, was up in what we called the Joyland Apartments. And our road dead ended into their apartments. Whites lived down there at the end of the line. So by the time the bus got to us, it was filled with white people. Not filled to capacity, all the seats weren’t taken, but they would be seated at window seats all the way up and down the bus. You couldn’t sit with them. The seats next to the isle would be vacant. For a time we thought they were just trying to be mean. But then later we realized they were seated next to the window because they wanted to get as far away from us as they could. They knew we would be boarding the bus and standing. And if they were standing in the aisle seat and left the window seat vacant, they would be close to us. So they would roll themselves to the window and turn their faces out so they wouldn’t see us. 45

Another activist witnessed several societal issues taking place in Atlanta, Georgia as well. However, unlike the activist mentioned above, she also witnessed the daily reminders throughout her childhood of racism the American south. By the time she attended

44. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.

45. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
college, she was well aware of the plights taking place in this location. She provided a brief overview of the racism she experienced daily. She observed firsthand the lack of educational resources. Yet, as a young girl, she tried to manipulate her current situation as a means of highlighting the injustice she experienced as a young black woman in Atlanta:

So I just feel like as a young person all around me was discrimination. You could go downtown. You could not go to the bathroom. You could not drink from the water fountain unless it said ‘Colored’. Um, and I just felt that this is not right in a human society. So, I would say, to try and answer your question, I went to college already feeling strongly about inequalities in America... And especially in Atlanta, where I grew up. I went to separate, unequal schools. Um, I could remember our desks being passed down from the white schools and they were discarded by the white schools and came to our schools. I remember that we got second hand books instead of fresh books. And I remember being a pretty fussy kid. I would stack up several sheets of paper so that those ridges that the other kids names and whatever they wrote on those desks would not come through what I was writing. So—and that was starting from elementary school. We didn’t get a new desk or we didn’t get new books all the time. We got the ones that were left from the white schools. And that made an impression upon me, especially those desks.⁴⁶

Consequently, another activist perceived her childhood in Atlanta, Georgia as ideal. While her family grew up in a segregated environment, she still received all the advantages a young, black child could receive. Her mother graduated and worked for a local college while her father was a professor at another local college. Unlike the previous participants, she did not witness any racism first hand in Atlanta, Georgia. From her perception, racism was not an issue she experienced while in living in Atlanta, Georgia. This city produced a strong, black middle class, allowing them to create this space where racism did not infiltrate unless they stepped out of this space. However, she experienced racism once she attended a boarding school in the North. Once she left her comfortable space within the black community, she recognized the negative and

⁴⁶ Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
misguided views others have of African-American people. The researcher believes her experiences differ from the other participants that grew up in Atlanta, Georgia because this participant saw the unity within the black community overshadowed the racism that took place. In other words, the racism she faced did not become obvious until she was removed from that space and the agents of racism became her peers. This experience appeared to alter her consciousnesses, causing her to participate in the movement:

I went to a, I guess what you would call a college preparatory school. It was a boarding school in Massachusetts. And I was there 10th, 11th and 12th grade. And uh, there were 500 students in the school. And out of 500, there were seven black girls, Negro girls. So, that’s where I first just had a sense of really being a minority. Because, you know in Atlanta, we were segregated so we had such a strong middle class and a strong community of black people that it just didn’t dawn on me that all of this was out there that I didn’t know about. I mean, we knew each other, had our own businesses, so it was really great. So when I went to Northfield, I encountered, you know, prejudice. I encountered conversations about like how the white girls didn’t like the Negroes. And I encountered, even if you were a black girl, if you wanted to room with a white girl, the white parent would have to write the school and get permission for their daughter to room with you. But your parents didn’t have to write any permission. And, uh, even dating—Mount Hermon boy’s school—was where we would find our dates. Uh, they too, the white students, would maybe ask me out on a date. But when they found out that I was a Negro, things would change. So, that’s where I first witnessed real nitty-gritty kind of segregation or discrimination I guess you could call it—and values, assessments, judgments about Negros that weren’t very nice. 47

On the other hand, one participant grew up in Joaquin, Texas, coming to Atlanta, Georgia to attend college. However, she experienced racism most of her life. Thus, the movement gave her the opportunity to fight against all the things she experienced in Texas. She figured her contribution to the movement would give her the opportunity to speak against the racism she experienced. She recalls vividly the kind of childhood experiences that she had. She mentions how she witnessed a sheriff come into her church and beat a man. She describes how “there was a sheriff in town that was very brutal. I mean, even as a child, I

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47. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.
knew that. And the experience of having the sheriff come into my church and beat a man, that probably happened to me at the age of eight.” Moreover, she describes the lengths that the community went through to ensure they were segregated from the white community. Of course these memories are strong because they emphasize the epitome of childhood such as going to the park and the fair. However, racism remained a large component in her childhood experiences. So, a revolutionary consciousness manifested with this participant because of the harsh realities she faced during her childhood. In fact, she describes them as “insults.” However, those “insults” became normal, typical life experiences:

Going to the movie theater and having to go upstairs. And we had friends who were white, who lived behind us. We were actually behind them. They were on like a main street and we were like on the black street. There was a fence, but it went down in certain places. We would just walk over and play with each other and then walked up to town on Saturdays sometimes and go to the movies and they would go downstairs and we would go upstairs. And there was a little roadside park in town. And I would always ask the question, ‘why, why, why?’ ‘Why can’t we go to the park? Why can’t we go to the lake? We couldn’t even go to the lake… There was colored folk day at the fair. We couldn’t even go on their day. Now, they could come on our day. It was that, and it was just insult, after insult, after insult. Not even to mention the segregated schools and the used books and worn out… and, all of your life you are told, ‘This is just the way it is.’

Furthermore, part of the experiences the participants had with racism prior to college was witnessing how other people in the American South addressed their family members. This name change became a means of dismantling the family member’s identity and role. No longer are their parental figures mothers, teachers, ministers, or fathers. Suddenly, they become inferior, stripped of their titles, roles, or education. Because of this kind of behavior taking place in the American South, the racism became

48. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
49. Ibid.
an obvious reality to the participants who grew up in this region. In fact, part of their African cosmology entails respecting elders. When they witnessed younger, Caucasian people addressing their parental figures as less than elders, this challenges their African perspective regarding respecting elders. For example, one activist mentions the confusion she faced when she saw her father being addressed as “nigger” when he was a prominent member of the black community. He was considered a minister, teacher, and principal. The community looked up to him similar to an elder in the African community. However, a white police officer disrespected her father, challenging his role as an elder. What was shocking to her was that her father did not correct the police officer. In fact, she describes how he remained silent. From that moment on, she realized how silence was a result of fear in the legal system. This altered her consciousness as well because that not only motivated her to participate in the movement, but to become an attorney:

My daddy was driving a, I guess it was too nice of a car, but he got pulled over. He wasn’t speeding or anything. And he was insulted by the police and there was nothing he could do. And, uh, I always looked up to my father. He was principal of the school and he was a minister and people respected my father. And to have this man—uh, what he said to him was, he asked for his license and he looked at the back and daddy had just gotten it. And in Texas at that time, you had to sign the license. He said—he called him the ‘N’ word: ‘N, Can’t you read? Can’t you write?’ And I was just sitting there in the backseat thinking, ‘Do you know who you talking to?’ But I was silent and he was silent. And, uh, so there was a fear that, based on reality, that your life was not worth very much when challenging the system. There were just, uh—although our parents did not talk hardly at all about the hardships about the racisms they faced, I knew that things were going on.  

Similarly, another participant mentioned this same confusion and fear when she witnessed a younger, white man address her father and brother. Her parents separated when she was young, so she grew up with her father. She received firsthand knowledge  

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50. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
of how black men were treated in the American South. She witnessed an insurance salesman being addressed as “sir” from her father. This was particularly odd to her because she grew up in a time when only elders were regarded as “sir” or “ma’am.” In fact, she did not understand why her father and brother addressed people in that manner, even if they were younger. Moreover, she knew that people should not address people as “sir” and “ma’am” simply because they are white or black. This caused her to increase her consciousness in the same manner the activist above mentioned. There was an underlying fear regarding their interaction with Caucasian people:

And, you know, I detested—you know I think another thing that stuck with me was how black males were treated, especially since I grew up with my father and my brother. And I could remember an insurance person, for example, who might be twenty-two coming to the door or similarly going to a service station and my father felt that he had to say, ‘Yes sir.’ And I thought, ‘I don’t think that’s quite right.’ And I don’t see them showing the same respect to him that he’s showing to them. And, you know, it was this ‘Yes sir’, ‘Yes ma’am’, I just thought that if that’s not—I was taught as a kid, when you say that, you say it to someone older than you are. You shouldn’t say it just because they’re white and you’re black.  

Another activist grew up in the American South where both of her parents were successful entrepreneurs. However, regardless of their status in the black community, they were addressed by other names. She recalls her mother, who owned her own successful beauty salon, as “Smitty.” Similar to another participant’s response, the black community in Atlanta created this space that protected them, until they stepped outside of the space. Then, they recognized the racism that existed in the South:

I remember as a child that there was a Jewish grocery store—the corner store. And I went shopping with my mother and I couldn’t have been no more than twelve. And uh, the people just called you whatever they wanted to call you. So,

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51. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
our name was Smith and they would call my mother ‘Smitty’. And I’m a child and I’m thinking—under my breath I said to him, ‘Her name is not Smitty.’

Because the affects of Jim Crow infiltrated into their homes and community, the personal become political. With that in mind, this research shows that geographic location plays a much larger part in deciphering the origin of black women activists. Most the participants could not speak of the experiences of their maternal figures. Yet, they acknowledged their lack of resources, mistreatment of their family members, and segregated facilitates. Their experiences in certain geographic locations fueled a revolutionary consciousness, causing them to participate in the movement.

The first thing Margo Perksins addresses is this idea of revolutionary process based on the autobiographies of Assta Shakur, Angela Davis, and Elaine Brown is recognizing the fact that it is a process. Perkins recognizes how revolutionaries are not so much born, but made by circumstances of their social milieu and by their exposure to critical pedagogy. The term “revolutionary” is utilized in this research the same way Perkins describes by describing how revolutionary perspectives seek to expose and challenge the interconnection of race and class. Comparatively, the Combahee River Collective and Patricia Hill Collins describe how the process of conscious rising among African-American women stems from their lived experiences with racism and sexism. Perkins, the Collective, and Collins all infer that the origin of black women’s activism stems from an increased consciousness individually that becomes transferred to the collective consciousnesses. Belinda Robnett’s analysis of social movements includes this analysis more in-depth. In her research, social movements start from understanding

52. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.

53. Perkins, 43.
identity individually and collectively. The social location of an individual in relation to the society provides a means of understanding movement mobilization.54 In other words, Robnett's analysis infers that movements are a result of individual consciousnesses that eventually alters into a collective consciousness. This shift of consciousnesses is revealed throughout this study as well. The participants came to college with an individual understanding of racism. When they attended college and joined the movement, their consciousnesses became part of the collective. Yet the research recognizes how this increased consciousness is a process, a seed that is planted from various aspects such as geographic location, childhood experiences, and maternal figures being examples of black womanhood. This research provides a concrete example of how this increased consciousness is actually manifested. However, these experiences lead to a consciousness they would not receive simply by witnessing the plights their maternal figures faced.

With that in mind, the South appears to yield a certain kind of consciousnesses one would not receive if they were anywhere else in the United States. As mentioned earlier, participants were not necessarily born as a revolutionary. Yet their experiences in a certain geographic location raised their consciousnesses and molded them to become activists. While racism was prevalent throughout the United States prior to 1960, the laws of Jim Crow in the American South fueled a unique revolutionary consciousness among African-American women. Many of the participants argued how overt the racism was in the American South versus other places throughout the United States. They admit that Jim Crow regulations filtered its way into their childhood. This created an environment of fear throughout their childhood, causing a certain level of post traumatic stress. However,

the participants glorified the Civil Rights movement as an opportunity to fight against the oppressions they faced their entire lives. Yet, before arriving at that point, they describe their experiences as traumatic experiences. Certain childhood normality's were altered because of the racism in the South. For example, one participant recalls the lack of safety for the African-American community. Because of Jim Crow in the American South, she recalls almost a traumatic childhood experiences. While this quote was highlighted earlier, it also explains how the lack of safety caused a bit of trauma for the participant, causing her to be reluctant to join the movement:

So it was—it was not just the law, it was the law saying separate but unequal. It was the lack of protection. So, you just did not feel that your life was—that you were safe in making just a citizen's protest. And that is why that nonviolent movement was so extraordinary because they stared—we started death in the face.  

Another participant describes how Jim Crow affected their demeanor toward whites simply walking down the street. An act simple as walking down the street in the American South incites a certain amount of paranoia. This created another daily reminder of Jim Crow in the South that caused a unique sense of revolutionary consciousnesses because simple behaviors are can incite fear. Additionally, fear manifested daily because of legal racism in the American South:

When you walked down the street, your parents told you things. Like, if you’re walking down the street and a white person doesn’t get out of the way, you must move so you don’t have any confrontations with them because you would be arrested. Um, so if you were walking down the street, and there was a space and a white person decided to come towards you, you had to make every effort to get out of the way, if it included stepping out into the street, off of the sidewalk.

One activist mentions how this fear was manifested in her consciousnesses growing up in

55. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.

56. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
the American South. Even though no one pointed out her "wrong" behavior, she felt fear for her behavior. She feared reprimand, even if her behavior was not disrespectful. However, this was her first form of nonviolent protest, silently challenging the Jim Crow system. Yet, she was still fearful sitting in front of a white woman on the bus. Based on this experience, it increased her consciousnesses regarding the fear that was embedded within her because she grew up in the American South. Her experience caused her to start asking questions herself regarding racism in America, in turn raising her level of revolutionary consciousness:

I remember we had to ride the bus. And when the bus gets at the end of the line going back into town, so the bus was overflowed with students. We got on there and packed the bus. It was a public bus, but it took us to town. Well, of course there was rarely any white people on there. So I got on the bus one day and I sat in the seat right behind the driver, which is a side seat. So I just got on and sat. And then I looked to my right and there was this white lady sitting there on the seat facing the driver. And I looked and I realized I sat in front of her. And you know that was a 'no, no'. And, I mean, I got this anxiety feeling, I was quivering and all this. And, you know, and then something came to me. And I thought, 'Why am I reacting like this?' I mean why can't I sit here? You know? So I did not move. I mean, I knew I was supposed to, but I did not move because I thought, 'This should not make me feel this way.' I mean, I'm just as good as she is, I was thinking to myself. I mean, I didn't move. And she didn't move. And she didn't complain. And that's the way we went to town. 57

Many participants recalled questioning the reason for the unequal treatment as well as questioning the level of fear they experienced throughout their childhood. These questions they had regarding equal rights, equal access, and the increased fear in the American South caused them to participate in a movement. Therefore, this research proves that the experiences in the American South raise a unique, revolutionary consciousness based on the traumatic childhood experiences with racism, which fueled their future activism.

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57. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
How do African-American women engage in politics and activism?

Findings

The participants were asked to define activism in their own words. Their responses were similar regarding how they defined this term. Based on their responses, all of them consent that engaging in politics and activism consists of any means of challenging a particular social system by utilizing their “voice” and increased consciousnesses through action by making a continual commitment in: 1) collective organization, 2) grassroots organization, 3) nonviolent protest, 4) community advocacy through community service projects. These four means of engaging in politics and activism can vary from small to more radical activities intended to challenge the societal structures. The activists involved in this research view their activism as a community-oriented, action-based activism. According to the participants, activism has to incorporate action for the betterment of the community. If both components are not utilized while engaging in politics or activism, then activism is not taking place. Therefore, all of these components contain both aspects of community development and action.

Furthermore, these four components also symbolize the progressive level of understanding they received regarding activism that spans from their involvement in the movement until present. While commitment, sacrifice, and action are essential aspects to all four of these components, they represent the process of increased level of consciousnesses they received regarding their role in activism and politics. The research question earlier mentions how the level of consciousnesses prior the movement was recognized as a process. Yet, after the movement, the participants recognized exactly how they can engage in politics and activism. Their activities the participants engaged in
during and after the movement determined how they incorporated their definition of activism within their lives. These factors are dictated by the climate of the generation. While the individual consciousnesses is essential in understanding how they engage in politics and activism, the historical realities of that time are significant as well. The level of participation is affected by what is taking place that particular generation. Thus, it depends on the historical realities of that time that determines how black women engage in activism and politics.

Collective organization is a principal highlighted by the participants’ understanding of what activism entails. They agreed that black women participate in activism in a collective manner. While they do speak of independent means of challenging the system, they speak highly of the collective mobilization the AUC student movement utilized. According to this research, collective organization in activism is essential for African-American women by simply having a large number of people participating in reaching a particular goal. As mentioned earlier, the individual consciousness leads to group consciousness. Moreover, the purpose of the collectivity is to reach a larger goal to assist the community. Their recognition of the group dynamic was essential during the AUC student movement. During the course of their interviews, they mentioned how the large numbers gave them a sense of safety. They all recognized that there was a large level of risk involved in their participation. However, they still participated despite the risk because of the large numbers that participated. Thus, to the participants, engaging in activism and politics incorporates a sense of collectivity in order to ensure mobilization of a movement.
Another means in which African-American women engage in activism and politics is through grassroots organization. The organization of the AUC student movement mobilized without the many resources. In fact, the only resources they had were one another. The AUC student movement was ran by students. Thus, grassroots organization in this research is defined as collective organization that originated from the community who share a similar cultural experience for the community to combat the societal issues the communities’ faces. While they may have not had the physical resources, their goals are for the betterment of the community by challenging the social system. They did not have the resources as college students, but they utilized one other to in achieving the larger goal.

Black women activists in this research also participated in activism and politics through nonviolent protest. While they attempted to challenge certain social systems, they did not believe in utilizing violence to make one’s “voice” heard. Black women participated in activism in nonviolent means such as sit-ins, marching, and picketing. These activities ensured their “voice” was heard without causing violence. Nonviolent protest was essential in the AUC student protest. A lot of participants mentioned the risk one takes when they went to participate in marches, picketing, or sit-ins. However, their commitment to nonviolence allowed them to follow through with their activities. According to the participants, nonviolent protests included tactics and emotions to incite the moral core of others.

Finally, this research shows that black women engage in activism and politics by participating in community advocacy through community service projects. When asked whether the participants considered themselves as activists, many of them mention
community service projects or situations they encountered that provided details of their activism. Many of them described community advocacy through community service projects as a means of defining their activism. Their advocacy consists of helping members within their immediate community and abroad after the AUC student protest. The participants contend that they are not simply using their “voice” for their own personal merit, but for the betterment of their communities. As stated earlier, they claim that having a “voice” without action is not activism. Activism to the participants consists of community-based projects based within the communities that they live.

Discussion

The individual conscious raising regarding black women’s role in activism and politics initially started based on the participants understanding the principal of collectivity. This idea of collective organization is similar to Ella Baker’s definition of participatory democracy. This term was utilized based on the time frame the participants were involved in this collective organization. More importantly, this was the population Baker was trying to appeal to in order to mobilize the Civil Rights movement. Many of the participant’s activist activities later were more an independent venture. Yet, during the AUC student protest, they understood the power of collectivity in terms of safety and power. For example, two activists describe the importance of numbers in participating in activist activities. In fact, one of these activists hesitated participating in the AUC student protest movement because she was afraid of the affect her participation would have on her parents. Also, she witnessed the lack of safety that the law has for African-American people, causing her not to take any serious moves until she saw the large numbers. Yet when she realized that more people were participating, she decided to join:
Soon after they got organized, they started having these mass meetings. And they would have them on each of the campuses in the AU center and I went to the ones that were at Spelman. And I was—really, it got my blood boiling. Uh, and I was excited about what was taking place. But I knew that I was really jeopardizing my parent’s jobs… we were hearing about students being, um, expelled, parents losing their jobs… It was my whole family that was impacted. So, when they first put out the call, I did not go. Um, so I kept up with all the activities...and then when they expanded to—they wanted a greater number of students, I said, ‘Well, there may be safety in numbers.’

Another participant recognized the power of collectivity by witnessing her first boycott.

She attended Ebenzer Baptist Church hearing from Martin Luther King, Senior. During that time, she describes a boycott conducted from all of the black churches in downtown Atlanta. They were boycotting a Jewish store that did not close during Sunday church service. At that moment, she recognized the importance of numbers when it came to making a stance. That was her first experience with collective organization. According to her story, collective organization among the black churches caused the store to be closed down. This remained an important aspect to her future activism, even during the AUC student protest movement. From this experience, she always referred back to how collectivity among African-American people can alter or change dynamics:

But there was a store across the street that was open on Sunday. And we’d go over and buy pickles and candy and bubble gum. And, of course, when we got to Sunday school, we didn’t have much money left. So Reverend King would tell us, ‘Don’t go over there buying stuff.’ Then he told the guy not to open on Sunday. I remember on Sunday he posted a deacon over there to turn us away… I remember the Sunday he stood up in church and pounded his fist, on the lectum and said, ‘I’m going to close him down. I told him to close that store on Sunday. And we’re going to close him down.’ The first boycott I knew. That ‘I don’t want anybody in this church or in this neighborhood shopping in that store.’ And I mean that store was surrounded by Ebenezer, Liberty, Wheat Street, and Big Bethel. And they told everybody in the neighborhood, ‘Nobody shop at that store.’ Closed them down… We shut them down. That was the first boycott. I remembered people calling it a boycott… But it was the opportunity to feel the power of the people… he understood, you know, there was not a person who was not of color living in

58. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
our neighborhood. And when they all got together and decided to do something, you could not operate a business in that neighborhood... So, I knew what would happen if people stuck together.59

The same participant recalls how her peers and her manifested this principal of collectivity. This experience stems from witnessing the power of the boycott. She recognized how a large number of people who were fighting for a similar goal can get a lot of work achieved. It can be inferred the collectivity produces a certain level of consciousness regarding community. She recalls how her peers and her decided to take action to change the busing situation they experienced daily. Their collectivity created a creative solution to the problem:

But there would be a number of us riding the bus to downtown Atlanta to get transfers and go to our various high schools. Well, by the time I was a senior, we talked about what we were going to do about the empty seats among ourselves because we always rode the bus going to football games, basketball games, track meets. And we decided if we couldn’t sit next to them, then we were going to put our books in the seats because books were not persons. There was no law against that. I remembered we discussed it with Reverend King senior at that time. He said, ‘Well there was no law against it. Just make sure you don’t touch them. Make sure you don’t let the books touch them or you may be charged with assault.’ And we talked about it and talked about what was going on on that bus on my way to Spelman. And I was standing towards the rear of the bus. And suddenly, somebody started handing me some books. And I knew the plan. If someone gave you books, you put them in the seat next to you. So the books just continued to come. And if one seat became piled high with books, you would put your hand on top of that book so as the bus moved, the books wouldn’t fall. Well finally the people started getting up, going to the front. And whenever some white person would get up and move to the front, we said, ‘thank you,’ so we would be able to seat in those seats. And we did that all of one week. Well the next week when we boarded the bus, all the white people were seated double in the front... If you truly stick together, you can affect change. You really, really can.60

Part of this power of collectivity was manifested during the AUC student protest movement. Most of the participants received their first understanding of how collectivity

59. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.

60. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
mobilizes a movement. One of the participants was one of the original founders of the Committee on the Appeal of Human Rights. She discusses how the collectivity among students in the AUC to mobilize the movement. Moreover, she highlights how the people started collecting together to start the movement, recognizing how all the schools in the AUC needed to work together to make the movement possible:

Well, it just so happens that I was one of the initial founding members on the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights. What happened is the presidents called student leaders from the various universities to a meeting and there were three representatives from each school. There was the president of the student body. I was a secretary of student body at Morris Brown at the time. And there was another person, and he may have been the treasurer. But um, we assembled. 61

Comparatively, another activist in the movement mentions the collectivity among the students within the AUC. In fact, during the movement the collectivity gave them a sense of belonging and identity within the movement. This collectivity transferred into a collective identity among the participants. She describes how the AUC was “not a separate—yes, I was Spellman, but I was Spelman and I was Clark College and I was Atlanta University and I was Morehouse College, Morris Brown, and I was ITC and I was community. And I was high school, and I was with Atlantans fighting. That’s how we were.” 62

An important aspect that the participants mentioned was recruitment. Part of collectivity entails recruiting in order to increase the numbers of members involved. Specifically, one participant vividly describes the process of recruiting people to be a part of the movement. From her perspective, numbers were essential in the movement. From her story, collectivity was essential by recruiting students to be involved. Once she

61. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.

62. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
received the principals of nonviolence training, she was urged to ask others to participate. She was part of the first group who recruited. After all, mobilization cannot occur if there is not a collective in numbers and spirit. In fact, some participants were a result of this recruiting after they were informed of what was taking place. Thus, they joined the collective based on the recruiting efforts from this participant:

I was one of the first group in 1960 that helped, organize the movement. But primarily around sit-ins that we were planning. So I went back to campus, talked to other students and encouraging them participate in the sit-ins... So as you went back to the campus trying to encourage people to participate, I remember having to strongly say, 'If you have any fears about your life or anything else, this may not be for you. But if you are totally committed to what we are doing here, you know, please come and join us.' 63

Ella Baker’s idea of participatory democracy called for progressive, direct action as a part of a broader set of collective citizenship obligations.64 The participants of this research and Baker recognize that the mobilization of any movement is to recruit a large number of people and utilizing their skills. First, the participants of this research received an understanding of the dynamics of activism because of the large numbers who were willing to take this risk to have their voices heard. Because of the large numbers, their voices could be better utilized. Given the daily reminders of Jim Crow, they could not participate unless they were joining forces with others to make that voice much louder. Their collective participation was similar to the soft voice turning into a loud voice once they were joining with other people. So, black women’s initial engagement in activism and politics begins with being a part of the collective and utilizing their skills within that collective.

63. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

Grassroots organization becomes important once the participants understood the idea of collectivity. Black women have often engaged in activism and politics through grassroots organization. Once the participants understood the importance of collectivity, the second part of their consciousnesses becomes looking at the logistics of how a movement is mobilized. Rush Memorial acted as the meeting place for the students during the protest movement, acted as the headquarters for the grassroots organization. One participant highlighted her role as a secretary for the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR) whose office was in the basement of Rush Memorial. She describes, “Now as the movement got going in the Fall of 1961, I was in the office more than I was in class. (B and C laugh) I left home and I went to the Atlanta Student Movement office that we had at Rush Memorial.”

Another participant recalls meeting at Rush Memorial to receive orders before marching. She recalls “going to the church. I think we went to this church on—this is Chestnut—And Brawely—Yeah, you know right here where we would go and hear what we needed to hear. And we would go and march.”

Another participant was reluctant to start. Yet she still assisted in mobilizing the movement by contributing her time to help those who planned to participate in the marches. She mentioned her first involvement in the movement consisted of meeting at Rush Memorial Church to create the plaque cards for the marches before actually joining the movement. She explains how she “just watched and waited. And then, they started, uh, making signs—I started—my involvement was gradual. Working at Rush Memorial

\[65^\text{th} \text{ Interview with black women activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.}\]

\[66^\text{th} \text{ Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.}\]
church helping to make signs and I was just going to meetings and finding out what was going on." 67 Part of this grassroots is also working in conjunction with other community members. Black women activists in this research worked directly with others to assist in achieving their goal. This participant was a student-adult liaison, who worked directly with members of the community. While the movement was well organized by the students of the AUC, they needed members of the community to help achieve their objectives. She describes how she “also helped organizing some mass meetings that we had for community people to come and see what was going on and so forth and so on. Um, the student liaison committee was formed so that the black community leaders would have some inside information and could support the students and vice versa.” 68

During the AUC movement, the participants were college students who did not necessarily have the recourses. Yet the lack of resources did not necessarily hinder their mobilization. Their organization was developed from the community for the community. Typically, this development becomes the bottoms-up approach. Grassroots organizations are built upon the back of volunteers. Many participants in this research participated in the movement without any financial gain. Their future activist activities did not help them incur any financial support as well. Yet the purpose of their involvement did not stem from the desire to gain monetary funds. Grassroots organization allowed the participants to receive a level of empowerment through voluntary involvement and action. In this research, participants engaged in activism and politics through grassroots organization because their involvement is voluntary while also leading to empowerment for

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67. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
68. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.
themselves and the community. Belinda Robnett refers to grassroots organization as being a result of spontaneous, emotional tension. The same was evident during the AUC student protest movement. The grassroots support came based on emotional responses to inequality. From this emotional mentality spurred strategic planning. As Robnett mentions, there were many instances of spontaneity and emotionally energizing acts by movement participants initiated planning grassroots activities. The participants described how their participation developed from an emotional, spontaneous place as well. Their numerous experiences with racism in the American South incited their participation. Thus, their consciousness was not only based on their prior experiences, but their response to those experiences they faced that caused them to participate on the grassroots level.

Nonviolent protest becomes a result of the grassroots organization. Many of the participants mentioned the nonviolent protest methods they utilized during the movement. The students during this era utilized this tactic as a means of protesting and sharing their “voice”. Nonviolent protest simply became the strategy in which they protested Jim Crow. Moreover, nonviolent protest became manifestation of this revolutionary consciousness the participants developed. They were able to challenge the social system without necessarily inciting violence. After all, their purpose was not intended to cause violence, but to fulfill a specific goal for the community. The participants agreed that challenging a societal system does not cause violence. All the participants in this research highlighted their experiences in sit-ins, marching, and picketing. In fact, according to one activist, a student could not participate in the

69. Robnett, 69.
movement unless they practiced the principals of nonviolence. A principal of nonviolence training was completed by the founding members of COAHR who participated to receive knowledge regarding nonviolence and resistance. The participant described the principals of nonviolence they adopted in detail:

We learned a lot about Ghandi and his principals—Ghandi of India and his principals. A lot about what it means to be nonviolent. And a lot about nonviolent protest and nonviolent—oh, there was another word—protest might be the best word for it. There are all kinds of revolutions and, in many ways, this was that. But we, you know, we knew just from history of some other revolutions, or protests, that could turn violent. So the commitment here was, on our part, there would be no violence. So we learned a lot about those principals of nonviolence stemming from Ghandi I would say primarily. 

In fact, these rules they adopted helped uphold the principals of nonviolence. When they went into a venue for a sit-in, they could not react to their environment. Even in the harshest conditions, participants described the measures they took in order to practice nonviolence. Yet, their training taught them to expect the unexpected. While they were trying to make a peaceful stance, it was possible that the people they encountered would not react in the same manner. One participant mentioned an experience where she participated in a sit-in at a lunch counter. Even though a waitress poured ammonia on the counter, they still had to stay at the counter until they were told by their leaders to leave. The participant recalls not being able to react to the hostile environment:

My other job was to go and sit at counters with other students. Our assignment was to go in, sit there, stay there until we were told to get up and leave. And then we would get up and leave. So that was pretty much it. We were told where to go, go in and sit, and stay there until you were told to leave no matter what was going on... while sitting in at the lunch counters this white waitress said, 'Ya'll just gonna have to leave. Ya'll just gonna have to get up out of here.' And we were told, like I said, to come and sit. We were told to stay there until we were told to leave. So she said, 'Well if ya'll aren't going to leave, I'm just going to have to do this.' And she went and got this big bottle of ammonia. And she opened it and just

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70. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
poured the ammonia right down the center of the counter…. And of course, we couldn’t leave until we were told, so the people that were outside doing whatever they were doing, so they didn’t know all this was going on. So we were sitting there, we had to sit there as she poured ammonia on the counter.\(^\text{71}\)

Another participant mentioned the measures she had to practice the principal of nonviolence. She witnessed a person throw a glass Coke bottle at her sister’s head. Yet even with the immediate dangers that were taking place, she had to maintain her stance of nonviolence:

> There was one important sit-in I remember I was sitting in with my sister Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. And it was in Davidson’s downtown. And I was at one counter and one of the waitresses got very, very angry and picked up a Coca-Cola bottle and threw it directly at her. And it missed her head by an inch… And she had no idea because she was sitting with her back to it. But I was sitting where I could actually see it. So that was an awful experience. After that, she would’ve definitely been in a coma.\(^\text{72}\)

Nonviolent protest was utilized as a tactic for the participants. This method became the best means used to reach the goal they set to improve human rights and social justice.\(^\text{73}\) Thus, they engaged in activism and politics in this manner because this was their first opportunity to utilize their empowerment in a tactical, peaceful manner.

Protesting in a nonviolent manner was not merely a tactic. This stems also from the participants stance on moral principles. The participants described nonviolent protest as a means of incorporating their core morals and conduct. In other words, nonviolent protest was indoctrinated in their core value system even before the movement took place. Most of the participants incorporated a sense of emotional understanding to their involvement in the protest. So, instead of the AUC protest being one of violence, it was

\(^{71}\) Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

\(^{72}\) Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 5, 2010.

from the principal of nonviolence they adapted from various leaders during that time such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. One participant mentioned how much of her understanding regarding civil liberties were heard from Martin Luther King, Senior. So, when the time came to participate in the movement, her emotional response caused her to join. While the participant mentions not knowing when the time would come for her to utilize her understanding of human rights and civil liberties, she knew when the call came, she would participate in a nonviolent manner like Martin Luther King, Senior urged:

He made me believe that no matter what people say and no matter where you are, you are somebody special. You had the same rights guaranteed to everyone else by the Constitution. I mean, not my social science teacher, but he started me reading about constitutional rights. So it’s kind of really interesting as you look back on the things—as I look back on the things that went on. And you never say, I want to prepare you to do this in the year ’59, ’60, ’61. It wasn’t that, it was just you have to be prepared when the time comes. Nobody knows when it’s coming. But it’s coming. If you live, you will see change. And it was true.74

Another participant’s emotional charge came without any prior understanding of racism. She grew up in a diverse environment, not being hindered by the plights of racism like in the American South. However, once she attended college in the South and witnessed firsthand the affects of racism, she was emotionally charged to participate. While it was immediate, it was spontaneous and emotional as Robnett suggests. She mentions making the transition from being a high school senior to becoming involved in the movement:

In March of 1960, if you would’ve asked my classmates where we were, we were not thinking about any of this. We were thinking about graduating and things you do in high school as a senior, in your senior year...how do you make that transition from March 1960 to October 1960 to get up and go march when in fact, just a few months ago, you were a high school student with high school ideals and with high school expectations. So, I’m telling you my transition was to see ‘Coloreds’ and ‘Whites’. My transition was to know that the West End was

74. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.
predominately white and you could not—you had to be careful going out there in that neighborhood in the West End. And you could not get a hotdog. You just went and got whatever little thing. Mostly everything you needed was on campus. Hershell made an appeal and called all the students together and asked would we be willing to march for freedom. Well, I was the first one to be there. Because I was like, ‘Yes. I have to do this!’ What in the world are they talking about? You can’t eat a hotdog? You can’t go anywhere you want to go? You are restricted. You can’t talk to white people and that’s all I have been talking with... you’re telling me now that I can’t talk to those people because I am black? And I don’t know I’m black. I don’t know what I am, because now I’m in the South. And that impacted me to the point where I joined the movement.75

Similar to Harry Lefever’s assessment of nonviolent protest,76 the participants adopted the principals of nonviolence to their actions during the movement because it was a strategy that was meant to appeal to the moral conscience of the public. Ultimately, that is what black women activists try to incite through their nonviolent behavior. Their goal is to reach to the humanistic consciousness and moral core of the larger community, which is better recognized by participating in nonviolent protest.

After the participants recognized the moral and tactical understanding of nonviolent protest, they utilized it through community advocacy. The participants mentioned a lot of traumatic experiences that they experienced during this time. However, their participation in the movement is actually glorified. They often credit their involvement in the movement as a catalyst for their future activist behavior. So, their response to the movement was not one of anger or resentment, but one of empowerment for future advocacy work. Their participation in community advocacy after the movement was as a response to the political oppression they faced as well as the victory they experienced as a result of their involvement in the movement. An activist in this research

75. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.
76 Lefever, 254.
highlighted a list of activities in which black women have participated in activism. The list is not exhaustive, but it is a great example of the array of means black women engage in activism and politics. Yet all the activities are utilized to assist the larger community through community advocacy:

Taking a stand, looking at whatever you look at in life and then taking a stand. And then supporting that stand with whatever you need to support it. That would be, uh, calling your representative to say, ‘I want you to support this bill or not support that bill’, or participate in the community meetings about getting changes made for the better, uh, volunteering to feed the homeless or to support young children in Africa, that you can, you know, support through monetary gifts. It just gave me a world where I thought I could make a difference in what I would do and what I could say. That’s pretty much it.77

One particular example of a black woman’s engagement in advocacy is by assisting with the education system. While she was not a teacher herself, she volunteered as a mentor. She details the importance of mentoring within the community to help educate youth. She was disturbed by the current education system, so she decided to advocate for education through mentoring within the community:

I am just so moved to do something about our educational system. Now, so far, all I have done is serve as a mentor. I served as an elementary school reading tutor for young black men, providing books, but it’s just drops in the bucket. And so, that is one of the things I’m looking forward to doing when I retire is to devote more time to working with children because I am so saddened by what is going on. 78

Comparatively, another activist mentions her work in Mount Boyou, Mississippi, where she organized students to assist underprivileged children of that community. She recognized the plight taking place with the children in that community. So, she took steps to ensure that they would receive some means of relief:

77. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.

78. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2010.
I taught, for example, at Ohigha University. And there, I, for example, organized students to go to Mount Byou, Mississippi to the tent cities to help see what was going on and to bring relief to people in any way we could. I just thought this is something I need to do. I knew of the tent cities, for example, at the time in that area. And I was teaching in Ohigha. At that time, mostly white students went in personal cars and so forth. Um, it took a lot of nerve but I just had that nerve that wanted to make a difference to bring whatever help we could to that community in Mississippi. 79

One activist worked in Social Work after graduating from college. She recalls how the movement gave her an extra charge to help others throughout her career. While she made a career out of helping others, she was charged to help individuals based on her experiences during the movement. She engaged in activism by her extra “gusto” she exuded throughout her career in social work by helping young women during difficult times in their life:

The choices that I’ve made in life and the things that I did in my life really gave me kind of an edge that I would give to it. I did a lot of one on one social work with young women, very young women who—like 10, 11 years old—that became pregnant. I mean there was just, I think, a need to not just interact on a normal basis but to interact with a thrust and a commitment that activism gave me to make a difference. 80

Another participant mentioned her most recent activist behaviors while she fought for her peers. The term “community” in her story refers to her peers. Their university was participating in a class reunion. However, some of her peers were unable to attend the meetings because they were still employed. Most of the women who were facilitating the event were retired school teachers. However, this participant fought for her peers, urging them to meet later to accommodate everyone. She became an advocate for her peers who were employed. She found that it became a class issue within her group of peers:

79. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

80. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 30, 2010.
My classmates, and we’re seventy and older, it’s our 50 year reunion decided to meet once a week or once every other week at 11:30. There are six of us in the city who cannot come at 11:30. The other five are working. And they said they weren’t going to change the time. And I wrote an email to them and indicated that they should change the time. It was in response to them complaining that there were only nine of them meeting. I said, ‘You are meeting at a time that isn’t convenient for everybody.’ You have to meet at a convenent time, maybe in the late afternoon if you don’t want to meet at night. They sent me a response that if people were truly interested, they would change their schedules and come. I said, ‘Well these people have to work.’... But I believe in having principals and living by them. I don’t believe it’s just for other people, they are for me too. And I mean, I told them you are products of a segregated age. You are seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two years of age, how can you discriminate? How could you practice discriminatory behavior against a certain group of people? People who work.\(^{81}\)

Some participants mentioned involvement in politics as well. Their involvement in politics consisted of voting or writing a letter to a representative. Most of it surrounds the idea of accountability. While the participants in this research were not heavily involved in politics, they still made sure that their “voice” was hard by either voting or staying in contact with a representative. To the participants, voting was essential to the political process. One participant mentioned how essential voting was for African-American people. In her church, her pastor would have people who registered to vote recognized during service. So, since she was younger, she recognized the importance of voting:

Uh, I grew up hearing that people should vote. I remember I kept hearing about it and I didn’t know exactly what it was. But when you got to be 18, you were supposed to register to vote. That was the only way you had a voice, you had to vote... That was like special. People in the church would stand up who were eligible to vote. He [Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr.] would have people stand up who had registered to vote. You were supposed to vote.\(^{82}\)

Another activist mentions her rallying to get people registered to vote when she lived in Boston, Massachusetts after graduating from college. She went to predominantly black areas of Boston, urging them to vote. After the movement, she claimed that registering

\(^{81}\) Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, December 15, 2010.

\(^{82}\) Ibid.
members of the black community to vote was a mission she set out to help the community. In fact, she mentions how the AUC protest movement motivated her to become an advocate for African-American’s involvement in politics through voting. So, her mission was to ensure that African-American people in her area were registered to vote:

For the rest of my life, I was committed to voter registrations. And to—and working in that area in particular when I moved from Atlanta to Boston to teach. And I held my own voter activities, you know. I would go to the lower communities of Boston, Roxboro in particular, with a girlfriend and knock on doors near the time of elections and asked people if they were registered to vote and encouraged them to go vote, so, stemming from that particular activity. And I’ve always been committed to doing—wherever I was whatever I could to change discrimination and inequality.83

Given the participants responses, it appears as if the purpose of black women’s activism through community advocacy is a means to challenge the existing power structures and institutions. The protest gave the participants an understanding of how social systems incorporate institutional racism and sexism. So, their community advocacy is a means of transforming institutions. This is similar to Patricia Hill Collins dimension of Black women’s activism that consists of struggles for institutional transformation by making efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures in government, education, workplace, media stores, and other social institutions.84 With that in mind, black women in this research engaged in activism by community advocacy in order to challenge several societal structures. The AUC student movement provided them the tools needed to attempt transforming any institution necessary.

83. Interview with black woman activist, Atlanta, Georgia, November 18, 2010.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the data presented by the interviews. This chapter highlights the complexities of black women’s activism as well as the role the maternal figures play in their activist behaviors. Maternal figures were the basis of this analysis to decipher whether maternal figures are necessary for black women’s activism. Additionally, their responses incited several themes and principals regarding black women’s response to their geographic location as well as how that it utilized in their activist behavior. Finally, the research investigated what manners black women engaged in activism and politics after the AUC student movement. Thus, the chapter highlights how the research questions were answered by the participants.
The initial purpose of this research was to investigate whether or not the political behaviors of black women maternal figures in traditional or nontraditional political means, influence their daughter’s future political activities. This research stems from the limited analysis of black mother-daughter relationships. First, it is viewed in a European manner, disregarding how the unique African-American culture causes black mother-daughter relationships to differ from other groups. Secondly, the scholarship does not fully address how this relationship explains the origin of black women’s activism. Black women activists often cite their maternal figures as being influential to their decision to become activists. However, this usually highlighted as part of a larger study instead of an independent study. Another problem this research highlights is the limited definition of political activity, engagement, and efficacy for African-American women.

In order to decipher whether maternal figures influence black women’s activism, the researcher developed three basic research questions utilized to make this distinction.

1. In what ways, if any, do the political behaviors of African-American women maternal figures influence their daughter’s future political behavior?
2. How, if any, do the political behaviors of African American maternal figures explain the origins of black women activists?
3. How do African-American women engage in politics and activism?

The findings of this research provide a greater understanding of maternal figures and black women activists. While black women activists idolized their maternal figures, it varied whether they defined their maternal figures as activists. Some activists argued that their maternal figures were activists while other activists did not describe their maternal figures as activists. The main component in determining whether their maternal figures were labeled as activists was based on their own perception of activism. In fact, those perceptions of their maternal figures impacted their own experiences. Even though the participants manifested their actions differently, the participants were very much like their maternal figures. Thus, the transference of actions and values actually occurred among the participants in this research. Nonetheless, all of the participants highlighted certain tenants of black womanhood that were utilized for their physical survival as well as their survival as activists. Similar to Jewel Prestage’s analysis of traditional versus nontraditional political behavior, activist activities can also be classified as tradition and nontraditional. Traditional activist’s activities would be evaluated from the African-American historical experience that consists of risk-taking activities such as sit-ins, boycotts, and voter registration activities. Nontraditional activist’s activities can be classified as small forms of resistance such as economic empowerment, nonverbal forms of resistance, and unwavering protection of family.

Furthermore, the origins of black women activists does not stem simply from their mother’s behavior. While their maternal figures were an influence, their childhood experiences in a geographic location led to their participation in the movement more than their maternal figures. However, their maternal figures passed down the tools and cultural
relevance of resistance to combat the racial oppression they experienced throughout their lives. African-American culture appears to be maintained through this method of passing down. Maternal figures act as the keepers of black culture. With that in mind, black culture and unity is passed down within black mother-daughter relationships as well. While black women’s scholars such as Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis introduce this phenomenon, this research applies how this cultural component is relevant in black women’s activism as well. This method of passing down occurred during the oral lessons they received from their maternal figures as well as their maternal figures actions. Typically, these actions are considered political, while other actions are simply means to teach life lessons. Contained in these lessons were also tools for black womanhood. Thus, their maternal figures passed down notions of black womanhood through verbal and nonverbal communication. Overall, this expands the definition of passing down among African-American women by incorporating maternal figure’s actions and words.

The American South incited a unique, revolutionary consciousness among African-American women. Typically, historians would describe Atlanta as being the “Black Mecca”. However, the participants were fighting against the racial and classist injustices that they witnessed in Atlanta, Georgia. Some participants highlight several negative childhood experiences they faced in this so-called “Black Mecca”. This research is unique because it fills in a gap regarding the sociopolitical and historical realities of Atlanta, Georgia during that time in terms of race and class. This city participated in segregation similar to other cities in the American South. The participants dispelled this myth, providing evidence that this city was not socially or economically progressive as the scholarship suggests. However, while childhood experiences provoke a certain
amount of trauma, involvement in the movement provided the activists an outlet in order
to express their concerns with the social power structures they faced in this regional
location.

African-American women engage in activism and politics once they have an
understanding of what activism entails. Their definition of activism determines their
activist behavior. The participants of this research engaged in this behavior through
collective participation, grassroots organization, nonviolent protest, and community
advocacy. All four of these aspects represent a systematic consciousness that starts from
their understanding of collective participation, which later fostered a grassroots
understanding of activism. Nonviolent protest was the manner in which they participated
in activism during this time that they continued to utilize beyond this era. Advocacy was
a result of their commitment to community that they developed during the movement. So,
their engagement in activism and politics spans from their involvement in the movement
to the present. Their response to the Civil Rights movement was actually positive, even
with the negative encounters some participants faced. While their traumatic experiences
with racism in the American South lead them to participate in the movement, their
involvement in the movement lead to future activist activities.

The review of the literature investigated what scholars said regarding black
motherhood and activism. Research provides evidence that this subject was
interdisciplinary. Black mother-daughters relationships and activism were investigated
from a sociological perspective, cultural perspective, and political perspective. The
findings also touch on these various disciplines as well as it relates to black women’s
activism. From a sociological perspective, black maternal figures do socialize their
daughters by means of "passing down" this notion of survival. The findings showed this transition taking place. However, the scholarship does not address exactly what values are passed down to black women to facilitate their activism. The findings addressed how their maternal figures become examples black womanhood providing them the tools they need not only to physically survive but survive as activists. With that in mind, socialization of black daughters must be investigated from a cultural perspective. One must investigate the culture of African-American people in order to understand the unique nature of this relationship such as the African tradition of "passing down". Politically, the literature review investigated what black women activists said about their maternal figures and how that planted the seed for their future activist activities. However, the findings discover that childhood experiences and geographic location play a critical role in contributing to the reason black women become activists. This was not a factor mentioned within the research found. Thus, this research highlights how black women become activists for various reasons, causing black women's activism to be a complex matter.

Karl Mannheim's theory of forerunners presented applies to this research based on the responses from the participants. The purpose of using Mannheim's theory is to show the actual transference of values and behaviors from one generation to the next. Many black theorists discuss this idea of "passing down" as a cultural phenomenon without taking into the consideration the sociopolitical significance of this act. As mentioned earlier, some participants labeled their maternal figures as activists while some did not. While one reason to explain this is their perception of activism, another way to explain it is based on the historical realities they lived in comparison to their maternal
figures. Yet, all the participants mentioned their maternal figures displayed the makings of an activism based on their words and actions. Comparatively, Mannheim’s theory suggests that each generation is simply an extension of the other. The only difference is the reaction to their historical realities. The participant’s described their maternal figures in the same fashion. While their maternal figures were forerunners for passing down this notion of activism and challenging the current social structure, they did not manifest it in the same way the participants did during the 1960s. Thus, the participants were simply an extension of their maternal figures. As mentioned earlier, while the participants did not necessarily define their maternal figures as activists, they were still very much like their maternal figures. However, their different historical realities caused them to challenge the social system in a different manner.

Originally, this research focused on black motherhood becoming the catalyst for activism. When this research started, the researcher planned to evaluate the responses based on Patricia Hill Collin’s reassessment of black motherhood. In fact, Nancy Naples and Patricia Hill Collins assess that black motherhood leads to activism. Nancy Naples refers to it as “activist mothering”, where motherhood extends past the community while Patricia Hill Collins discusses the reassessment of black motherhood. However, the participants in this research focused more on black womanhood than black motherhood. It is safe to assume that Naples and Collins’ research focused on women within the community who already had families and children. In other words, the activists that both scholars investigated were likely mothers themselves. With that in mind, they saw activism as mothering the community. Consequently, the participants in this research were teenagers and young adults who did not become mothers until after their
involvement in the movement. Black motherhood was not part of their consciousness during that time to motivate them to participate in the AUC movement. Given the participants ages at the time of the movement as well as the fact that they were not mothers themselves caused black motherhood not to be a factor for evaluation. However, maternal figures were influential as black female figures, not necessarily as mothers. Therefore, in this research, the origin of black activist’s participation does not rely on black motherhood.

Another aspect of this research not originally anticipated were two of the tenants for black womanhood: entrepreneurial spirit and perseverance. The other tenants they described were thoroughly investigated within black women’s literature. However, the idea of entrepreneurship and perseverance were two tenants that were not expected when starting this research. Black women’s literature investigates black women’s activism from a cultural perspective. Ironically, entrepreneurship is not highlighted as an important aspect of black women’s lived experiences. Yet, given the history of African-American women, some were able to own their own businesses. The question becomes what the collation is between entrepreneurship and activism. The tenant of perseverance is highlighted in the cultural perspective of black woman’s scholarship. While the term “perseverance” is not used directly, the content of scholars suggests this tenant. In other words, it was a trait or a historical reality that is often inferred, not blatantly stated.

The initial purpose of this research is to see whether maternal figures influence black women to become activists. One can hypothesize that maternal figures explain the origin of black women activists. However, this research shows that maternal influence depends on the activist’s perception of activism, their childhood experiences, and
geographic location. The question becomes whether the influence of maternal figures are a necessary component to black woman’s activism. Based on this research, these maternal figures are necessary to black women’s activism by providing them an example of black womanhood as well as the necessary tools to facilitate their activism. These maternal figures provide their daughters the blue print for survival as activists. However, maternal figures are not the only component to mold black women as activists. Black woman’s activism is complex identity that is manifested from a number of factors. This helps scholars understand humanities because black women’s activism tries to address the moral core of human beings. Their activism is not for themselves, but for the betterment of humanity. The participants in this researched addressed higher principals such as equality and differentiating between right and wrong. Additionally, this research proves that the human experience is multidimensional.

With that in mind, this research contributes to various research disciplines. It contributes to the black women’s scholarship by evaluating how black mother-daughter relationship encourages black women’s activism. Also, it reexamines the role black womanhood plays in black women’s activism. From a sociological perspective, this research evaluates how black maternal figures socialize their daughters. Additionally, it looks at how the black mother-daughter relationship is unique based on cultural realities. This research examines how maternal figures are the first examples of womanhood to black daughters. Being a mother remains an important component when raising a child, training them how to survive in a social setting. From a political science perspective, this research highlights the importance of culture when investigating black women’s political
participation. In other words, it combines the study of humanities and culture with the practical analysis of political involvement among African-American women.

**Recommendations**

One main recommendation for future research is to increase the sample size in order to make better generalizations. This research evaluated the responses of six women who were involved in the AUC student movement. However, the researcher would recommend that future research be done based on a larger number of participants who were involved in various movements. For example, one recommendation would be to include participants involved in student protests in the 1960s throughout the Southeast region. Perhaps if the sample group was larger, more generalizations could be made regarding black women activists during the time and the reasons they became activists. The research sample can also extend to black women activists and political figures that are currently active in their communities. Their responses may expand or challenge this research.

Many black women activists credit their paternal figures for their influences upon their perception of activism. Even in this research, one participant mentioned her father teaching her the importance of picket lines, causing her to teach others during the AUC movement. Another participant did not grow up with her mother because her father raised her after her parents divorced. She witnessed how racism affected African-American men differently. However, these responses were not within the scope of this research. If research is done on paternal figures, then that may shed light upon black women’s activism as well. Investigating paternal figures may also shed light on what degree of influence black men can have on black women’s perception of activism.
Further investigation can be conducted to see whether black women activists who grew up outside the American South perceive activism in the same manner. This would be analyzed to see whether black women’s activism is affected by location. Most participants in this research grew up in the American South, giving them a unique, traumatic perspective on race relations in America. However, one participant grew up in the Mid-West, where racism was not as blatant. Thus, further analysis can be done regarding geographic location outside of the American South affects black women’s activism.
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