

ABSTRACT

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AND MOTHERS IN POPULAR DISCOURSES

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With her insightful analysis, Nancy Lurkins in “You are the Race, You are the Seeded Earth:” Intellectual Rhetoric, American Fiction, and Birth Control in the Black Community (2008), asserts “ (past) black leaders promoted the ideal of black domesticity and moral motherhood as a counterstrategy to white attacks. Over time, appreciating and even desiring black motherhood came to be identified with black communal pride and as a result black women became responsible for upholding the entire race” (47). Similarly, recent history has proved to be no different when it comes to the responsibility of black mothers. This dissertation will explore how public discourses involving the social sciences, films, and novels historicize, represent, and re-envision black motherhood. It will investigate how these discourses about motherhood are shaped by the historical moment of their occurrence and what they tell us about the attitudes of those establishing critical thought. By examining texts like the *Moynihan Report*, Ann Petry’s *The Street*, Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the 1974 film *Claudine*, this project

will analyze the rhetoric of scholars about black motherhood alongside popular images of black mothers to illustrate how they overlap and how black women's bodies are consistently at the nexus of academic, social, cultural and political conversations. In an attempt to further complicate mothering studies by using black feminist thought as my lens, this dissertation seeks to tease out the interconnectedness of historical moments and discourses without perpetuating traditional gender norms as it relates to black female identities.

THE LONG TRADITION: BLACK WOMEN AND
MOTHERS IN POPULAR DISCOURSES

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Linda Sanders and father, Eugene Debrew for never losing their faith. For all the mothers in my life: LaSalle Wise, Mabel Brown, Doris Quarles, Geraldine Parker, Helen Stowe, Quenette Sanders, and to the mother of them all, Alberta Frazier Sanders.

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Chapter 1~ The Politics of Black Motherhood

Introduction

Motherhood has long captured the attention of black feminist theorists. The publication of books such as Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997), Elaine Bell Kaplan's *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood* (1997), Elizabeth Merrick's *Reconceiving Black Adolescent Childbearing* (2000), and Bette J. Dickerson's edited collection *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (1995) focus on the social politics of unwed mothers and reproduction. Additionally, texts like Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (1985), Lonnae O'Neal Parker's *I'm Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood, and Work* (2006) and Bart Landry's *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution* (2002) concentrate on the private and public work of black mothers. Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's edited collection, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters* (1991), and Cecelie S. Berry's *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood* (2004) capture some of the personal narratives that inform our perceptions and realities surrounding motherhood. From a theoretical perspective Kristen Clarke's "Toward a Black Feminist Liberation Agenda: Race, Gender, and Violence" (2003) and Siobhan Brooks's "Black Feminism in Everyday Life: Race, Mental Illness, Poverty and Motherhood" (2002) deconstruct the politics of motherhood for poor women of color. Ruth Feldstein's *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (2000) and Jacquelyn S. Litt's *Medicalized Motherhood: Perspectives from*

the Lives of African American and Jewish Women (2000) examines motherhood from a comparative approach by connecting race, politics, gender and popular culture. Each of these works demonstrates that black feminist theorists are paying attention to African American motherhood in all forms.¹

These works represent a small portion of all that scholars have published about black women and motherhood, but they do suggest important perspectives and conclusions for subsequent scholarly inquiries such as this dissertation. One conclusion that can be drawn is that in order to better understand the institution of motherhood for African American women it is necessary to do an intersectional analysis that links race, class, gender and politics. Second, some writers contend that it is necessary to locate black motherhood within an Afrocentric framework to counter negative European messages about black women and their families. Third, numerous texts link the historical legacy of slavery or post-slavery nineteenth century experiences to present day realities of motherhood. Finally, given that there is an increasing body of work that “serves as a corrective to the prevailing view that no long-standing black women’s intellectual

¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Bette J. Dickerson, ed., *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995); Cecelie S. Berry, *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood* (New York: Harlem Moon Press, 2004); Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberation, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Elaine Bell Kaplan, *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall eds. *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters* (New York: Beacon Press, 1991); Lonnae O’Neal Parker, *I’m Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood, and Work* (New York: Amistad Publishers, 2005); Bart Landry, *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Elizabeth Merrick, *Reconceiving Black Adolescent Childbearing* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001); Kristen Clarke, “Toward a Black Feminist Liberation Agenda: Race, Gender, and Violence” in *Freedom on My Mind: The Columbia Documentary History of the African American Experience*. Ed. Manning Marable (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Siobhan Brooks, “Black Feminism in Everyday Life: Race, Mental Illness, Poverty and Motherhood” in *Colonize This! : Young Women of Color in Today’s Feminism* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2002); Jacquelyn S. Litt, *Medicalized Motherhood: Perspectives from the Lives of African American and Jewish Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

tradition exists,” we need to uncover what has been hidden.² This dissertation hopes to complicate motherhood by using a black feminist theoretical approach to “uncover” what has been hidden in black women’s intellectual traditions as they concern motherhood. I look at the discourses about black women and mothers in three 20th-century sites: social science, films, and novels. This research locates the present day discourse on motherhood to its historical legacy perpetuated through popular culture and scholarship. This project is a textual analysis of the historically specific discourses by and about black women in that it emphasizes the relationship between scholarship and time periods, while also studying how black women were writing about themselves in novels and being represented in film.³

Questions and Methods

A number of questions drove this research. First, given the apparent significance of social scientists and popular films and novels at various points in time, not only in the academy but in society more generally, what did they have to say about black women in general and black mothers in particular? Second, when we look at the discourses over time, what were some of the significant political, social, or cultural moments that shaped discourses about black motherhood? Third, did the representations within each of the sites of discourse change across time, and if so, how? Fourth, were women and mothers

² Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters, “Introduction” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2007) p. 3.

³ Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Alan Mckee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide* (California: Sage, 2003).

valorized in the representations -- positive or negative -- and especially if they were negative, on what grounds was the representation based? Fifth, in the particular historical moments of the discourses were black women engaged in acting or responding to them? Sixth, in both the academic social science and the popular culture discourses, did the messages differ depending on who was telling a story? More specifically, did gender figure in the discourses in and across time, and did black women challenge lines of discourse publicly produced by men? Finally, is there evidence to suggest that black feminists have shaped the contemporary discourses in any of the sites?

To answer these questions, I employ a method widely used in historical and literary analyses, textual analysis. According to Alan Mckee, textual analysis is about making sense of the world through the interpretation of texts.⁴ The texts, in this project are (a) studies done by social scientists, (b) films, and (c) novels and literary criticism. My choice of certain texts had to do with their real and perceived significance to the study of African American motherhood.⁵ These texts not only lent themselves to interpretation but also helped describe the moment in which they were written and describe the attitudes of the writers and audience by and for which they were written. I chose texts that I believed were important in their time and were either influential in later times, as was the case with some of the social scientists, or among the films and novels

⁴ Mckee, p. 1-2.

⁵ For this, I examined novels and play/films that were popular during the various time periods for their subject matter. The criterion for being chosen was that a film/play had to be primarily about black motherhood. Aside from the social science texts, the popular texts had to have made a large enough impact on culture as to become the first or one of the first due to subject matter, sells or lasting/remaining impact.

were critically acclaimed by a subsequent generation. I did not assess whether any of the texts reflected a consensus of an audience in the broadest sense.

Historical Moments

The discourse on African American motherhood is complicated when it is comparatively studied within the subcategories of sociology, film, and literature as they happen within a historical moment. The three moments this research focuses on occurs in the late 19th to the early 20th century, the 1960s to the mid-70s, and the mid-70s to the late 20th century. The subgroups were also broken down by its corresponding period. First, the sociological discourse of the 1930s and 1940s made famous by E. Franklin Frazier's research on the black family was chosen because of its enormous impact on black family studies, the film-*Imitation of Life* (1934) as the first major motion picture to have two starring black actresses that focus on motherhood and Ann Petry's groundbreaking novel *The Street* (1946), which was the first by an African American woman to sell over a million copies offer up some of the larger impactful pieces of the moment.⁶

The historical moment of the 1960s and early seventies was chosen because of its connection to the previous moment in its examination of the discourses and as a critical period in the struggle for African American civil rights. The primary sociological text,

⁶ G. Franklin Edwards, "E. Franklin Frazier," in *Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. James E. Blackwell and Morris Janowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 85-114; Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, ed. Daniel Itzkovitz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1933); Hazel Arnett Ervin, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry* (Conneticut: Praeger, 2005).

Daniel P. Moynihan's "Tangle of Pathology" (1965), for certain, was not only based on much of the research put forth by Frazier in the 1930s, but also was research funded by the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration to promote civil rights. Moynihan's report subsequently acquired its own audience in political circles, and later on some black men echoed its gender divisive politics to promote a sexist agenda within the black power and civil rights movements and pitted men against the mothers that raised them and their children. Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which focused on a mother's relationship to her son, among other things, was the first book by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway and then as a film (1961). Both the play and the film were popular and critically acclaimed, earning Hansberry and the actors numerous awards. The novel selected for this moment was Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) which did not gain the popularity as the other texts mentioned but did receive a lot of negative attention from some black men (and women) because of Jones' attention to the psychological damage and sexual legacy left in the minds and on the bodies of black mothers by white men post-slavery.⁷ Jones nuanced the tensions amongst the *Corregidora* women, and their motives for choosing motherhood helped to complicate the discourse by connecting it to an even more complicated history of rape and sexual abuse.

The next moment, the 1980s to the late 20th century, was significant because of the proliferation of the second generation of black feminists writing and teaching in the academy, their texts on the book shelves, and their recovery of black women's history that had been ignored and in some cases lost. The work of black feminists such as Paula

⁷ Daniel P. Moynihan. *The Study of Black Families: The Tangle of Pathology* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965); Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967); Steven Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment and Complexity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Fiona Mills, *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayle Jones*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

Giddings, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Patricia Hill Collin, and Bettye Collier Thomas, along with others, resulted in a paradigm shift in the ways that we study black women and mothers. Their responses to the highly controversial Moynihan report also sparked a cross-disciplinary conversation by and about black women. These scholars went on to open the door for the creation of Black Women's studies courses in the academy.⁸

In literature, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) was selected because of its use of personal narrative and literary criticism in order to tell the story of black women's work that was overlooked or lost because of its *ordinariness* or seeming insignificance to broader movements. It is through the telling of our mother's stories that her "children" will go on to critique and challenge traditional discourses that perpetuate negative stereotypes and paint her as a one-dimensional figure.⁹ Lastly, I have chosen the film *Claudine* (1974) to highlight the popular movie images of the new black mother -- the welfare queen -- as the CRM and Black Power movement was fading. *Claudine* was a response to the backlash conservatives heaped upon poor (black) mothers for using welfare. This image would go on to have greater significance when the late President Ronald Reagan formerly characterized women on welfare as getting rich off of tax-payers dollars. Similarly, journalist Bill Moyers did a documentary titled *The*

⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Bonnie Thornton Dill, Tallese Johnson, "Between a Rock and Hard Place: Mothering, Work, and Welfare in the Rural South" in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across The Boundaries of Race and Class: A Exploration of Work and Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Barbara Smith introduction in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, introduction in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995)

⁹ Laurie McMillan, "Telling A Critical Story: Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004), under "Alice Walker Tells a Critical Story," http://lion.chadwyck.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/searchFulltext.do?id=R03562945&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1235932924_19861&trailId=11F28D9030D&area=abell&forward=critref_ft.

Vanishing Family (1985) in which unwed black mothers were noted as lazy and black fathers shiftless and irresponsible. Ironically, *Claudine* earned critical attention, and Diahann Carroll was nominated for an Oscar for the leading role.¹⁰

Why are these moments important from the perspective of African American history? Firstly, prior to the research published by social scientists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson in the early twentieth century, the lives and experiences of African Americans had not been studied in a way that humanized and considered them competent and capable citizens.¹¹ Thus, the research black social scientists did and the information uncovered was truly groundbreaking within academic circles. Secondly, while there were economic gains made for African American during these moments, these time periods also share the added distinction of enforcing a fierce Jim Crow regime in all areas of life for African Americans. Ironically, and almost simultaneously African Americans also birthed a cultural renaissance in the 1920s that continued well into the 1940s and 1950s to greater or lesser degrees. Black poets, actors, singers, and musicians like Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, and Louis Armstrong were just a few of the more well-known figures that came out of these moments. Last, and most importantly, these moments are also distinct from one another in that each generation of thinkers, artists, and even actors envision and embody what it means for them to be young, gifted, and black.¹² In the sections to come, I highlight the prevailing theoretical discourse on black motherhood that came forth out of these historical moments.

¹⁰ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p.254.

¹¹ Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine and Stanley Harrold, *African Americans: A Concise History*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 342.

Black Feminist Theory

Is the experience of motherhood changed by one's racial location? The answer may seem rather obvious, just like if one were to ask does class change one's mothering experience? This is not a comparative study of black motherhood, nor is it exhaustive, but I argue that race does change the discourse on motherhood. Just as other feminists have written extensively on the subject, this work also informs the prevailing theoretical conversations by connecting significant moments in the discourse to their relative decades. Likewise, black feminist scholarship like Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Bonnie Thornton Dill's *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (1994), and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (1995) are some of the earliest contemporary writings on black motherhood that theoretically locate the (practical and discursive) institution by blending the tradition of black American (covert and overt) resistance/survival strategies with an African-centered analysis.¹³

Furthermore, questions about black motherhood are answered in one of two ways. For some motherhood is approached as a theoretical and political lens by which women's

¹² Ibid.; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000) pp. 381-401.

¹³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Theory: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990) pp.115-137; Kesho Yvonne Scott, *The Habit of Surviving: Black Women's Strategies for Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

experiences are measured. For others, motherhood is about the quality of women and children's lives. Although these are not the only options for understanding motherhood, they are the most predominate categories in much of the theory written about motherhood in Black Feminists Theory circles. The compilation of texts centered here concentrates on historical and contemporary understandings of black motherhood principally as it is conceived within Western thinking. It also covers topics like birth control, abortion, and reproductive rights.

By comparing sociological writers and texts that focused on black motherhood to what was happening in popular culture surrounding the same topic, I found that although the social scientists were writing to a much smaller audience, compared to what was being said about black mothers in popular culture, there were some overlapping themes. These messages were troubling and although at times overlooked, black women intellectuals and novelists presented the only true challenge to the dominant discourse. Another mode of thought highlighted in this chapter is what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "self-definition".¹⁴ In other words, Nineteenth-Century African American feminists were deliberately self-conscious about constructing the meanings of black womanhood that included agency, intellect, pride, and a negation of what was being said about them in male-centered or non-black circles. I also borrow from historian Kristin Waters in that, "...women's knowledge is excluded by silencing women's speech and erasing the historical accomplishments and ideas of women".¹⁵ This project hopes to continue in the

¹⁴ ___, "The Politics of Black Feminist Thought" in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, 393-394 (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2007).

footsteps of contemporary black feminist's scholarship in its work of uncovering a long epistemological tradition of Nineteenth to Twenty-First Century black feminist's writings on motherhood.

Motherhood

This chapter will illustrate how the discourse is divided into three modes of thinking about black motherhood: the first I call the historical information, next, the cultural criticism of motherhood, and lastly is the practical experience of mothering.¹⁶ The construction of black women as mothers in public discourses is a complex one in that public discourse most often offered up images of black mothers as mammy figures, but this research separates the public from the private notion of mother. Therefore, in an effort to further challenge negative stereotypes, black women have written extensively on the practice of motherhood that provides a powerful lens by which to critique race, class, and gender oppression in America. In that vein, many of the texts here also center on black women's historical oppression. Dorothy Sterling's *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1984) and Gerder Lerner's *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1972) both use primary sources by and about black women to document their oppression. Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (1985) and

¹⁵ Kristin Waters, "Some Core Themes of Nineteenth-Century Black Feminism" in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, 386-387 (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2007).

¹⁶ This research specifically examines African American motherhood. Though the term black is used and is known for of its diasporic reference, this project limits its use to African American motherhood.

Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), uses an historical analysis to link black women's public and private roles as workers in the home and community. Finally, Bettina Aptheker's *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* (1982) marries the art of personal narrative and textual analysis in order to explicate the activists and resistance strategies of African American women.

In recent history, the topic of black motherhood has garnered much attention. In earlier texts, male writers both white and black have over-generalized black motherhood and in some cases conflated the institution with the perceived health of the family, and even though these are not all together separate issues, it limits one's analytical potential.¹⁷ Black feminist's scholarship past and present has yielded a much richer examination of the institution. Patricia Hill Collins writes,

The institution of Black motherhood consist of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, and with the larger African American community, and with self...Moreover, just as Black women's work and family experiences varied during the transition from slavery to the post-World War II political economy, how Black women define, value, and shape Black motherhood as an institution shows comparable diversity.¹⁸

¹⁷ Arguably, texts like E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), Melville Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), and Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1977) represent three of the largest debates in the study of black family patterns in the U.S.

¹⁸ Collins, p. 118.

Collins highlights one major factor that has helped to shape the discursive trends in black motherhood by feminists-motherhood as a lived reality. It is within this trend that two smaller aspects will be discussed: reproductive rights and abortion.

Motherhood texts are also categorized in larger camps that highlight reproductive rights, welfare, age, and singleness. Dorothy Robert's *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1998) and *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2003) both critique reproductive matters that have greater negative consequences for black mothers either in the areas of birth control rights and the legal system. Bette J. Dickerson's *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (1995), Asha Bandele's *Something like Beautiful: One Single Mother's Story* (2009), and Elaine Bell Kaplan's *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood* (1997) all challenge and deconstruct negative stereotypes of the single black mother who has been cast as either promiscuous and/or a welfare queen through qualitative research and personal narrative.

There are two smaller but significant camps within the focus on motherhood as a material condition-how-to and celebratory. Many of these texts are typically written by men in an effort to instruct black women (and family) on how to raise their children. Daniel Whyte III's *Letter to Young Black Men: Advice and Encouragement for a Difficult Journey* (2005), Hill Harper's *Letter to a Young Brother: Manifest Your Destiny* (2007) and Jawanza Kunjufu's *Raising Black Boys* (2007) are a combination of advisory and upliftment texts written to and about young black men, but also to the women who mother them. Popular literature that lauds black mothers is also prevalent. Kristin Clark Taylor's *Black Mothers: Songs of Praise and Celebration* (2007) and Keith Michael

Brown's *Sacred Bond: Black Men and Their Mothers* (2000) offer photographic accounts of black mothers caring for their children with first-hand narratives on the significance mothers have played in the lives of their children.

Comparative Analysis and Black Motherhood

Although this is not a comparative project, works that locate the experience of motherhood in multiple categories have been the most useful in the development of this study. Ruth Feldstein in *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (2000) frames her examination of black and white motherhood with the use of two political moments-New Deal politics in the 1930s and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. She writes that:

Psychological perspectives inherent in liberalism in this period required a focus on family dynamics. This focus led many liberal social scientists and others to conclude that white and black women who were bad mothers helped to explain racism in whites and its negative effects in blacks. Postwar racial liberalism implicitly and explicitly employed a gendered logic that scholars associate with a celebration of white nuclear families and an eclipse in organized feminism.¹⁹

Feldstein identifies another major theme in this research and that is that images and responses to black motherhood in American culture were dependent upon its presumed opposite-white motherhood. Black mothers and white mothers both suffered due to a

¹⁹ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) p. 166.

chauvinistic ethos amongst many male scholars, but black women, because of race had an extra cross to bear.²⁰

Nancie Caraway in *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and Politics in American Feminism* (1991) explains the inherent tensions between constructions of black and white womanhood that suggest:

Gender ideologies...thus evolved a dual set of polarized sexual codes that remained in constant tension: the white female's repressed sexuality, and the black female's controlled sexual appetite; the glorified white, the Black female breeder.²¹

As Caraway points out black and white female sexuality have traditionally been constructed as the other's antithesis. Thus, embedded within this project's analysis of social constructions of black motherhood are racialized assumptions of gender constructions.

Race and Representation

Racialized figures in film and television have been the topic of many textual analyses. This research utilizes some key criticisms that concern the construction of racial and gender types in celluloid. In her article, "The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audiences", Jacqueline Bobo, the cultural studies scholar, documents the tensions between critics and filmmakers on the interpretation of what

²⁰ Ibid., p.167.

²¹ Nancie Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and Politics in American Feminism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) p. 83.

makes a film *black* and good.²² Bobo argues that black audiences bring their own set of meaning making tools to the viewing of a film, thus terms like and good and bad are contested if audiences construct meaning and find value in a film critics pan. Hence, the work of interpreting film and novels in this project takes into account cultural criticism, reviews, and the overall reception of a film or novel and what it might tell us about the moment it was written in and the audience it was written for.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994) deconstructs the making of racial (stereo)types and the value their presence has in cultural productions that in most cases perpetuate white dominate patriarchal hegemony. Shohat and Stam argue that just as racist constructions of racial reality and representation in film is often problematic, oppressed groups attempt to challenge these interpretations by using “ ‘progressive realism’ to unmask and combat hegemonic representations, countering the objectifying discourses of patriarchy and colonialism with a vision of themselves and reality ‘from within.’”²³ This does not come without its own issues, but this research will draw on this idea as it examines the work of white and black filmmakers and black women writers.

Herman Gray's *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (2004), Bell Hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) and *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996) each tackle the literal and metaphorical struggle over

²² Jacqueline Bobo, “The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, Audiences” in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992) pp. 66-70.

²³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 180.

black representation in popular culture.²⁴ According to Hooks, race and representation is about,

...Transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking. [Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) p. 4]

This research documents when some of those paradigmatic shifts concerning black representation in scholarship, film, and novels happen within certain historical moments. As Hooks suggests, it is not the focus of this project to inscribe the traditional binaries of good vs. bad, instead it is more concerned with examining the moments those representations were shaped in, if there was any lasting impact, and if so, what was it, and if those images were problematic for some, what was the response? Were alternative images created? What did these “new” models signal?²⁵ These and other questions were raised about the novels of black women writers that will be explored in the next section.

²⁴ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Bell Hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁵ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Blacks in Film* (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1977).

Black Mothers in Literature and Film

Special attention has been paid to motherhood and family in literature for centuries and the literary criticism highlighting these characters and their use in the novel has also grown. Karla F.C. Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphor: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (1992), Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson's collection *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representation by African American Women* (2000), both highlight literature by and about black women in order to illustrate the development of the black female character as woman and mother. Valeria Sweeney Prince's *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (2004) focuses in part on the construction of the North as a trope in Black literature as a literal and metaphorical home. Each novel examined in this project is situated in the city, a shift from the agrarian scenes once common in Nineteenth-century literature.

In film, portrayals of black motherhood have been controversial and complicated. Ruth Feldstein points out that in the thirties a film like *Imitation of Life* (1934) sent a message of mother failure and punishment for women raising daughters, as these daughters were thought to become future mothers:

Director John Stahl affirms the potential for female success only by invoking the possibility of mother failure and by punishing both women to varying degrees. The daughters' problem's, which come to dominate the

plot, don't emerge out of the blue: the film fixes their origins in the two others.²⁶

In other words, the successes black and white women achieved were only as good as its impact on the family. The conflation of womanhood and motherhood was common in turn of the century discourse surrounding gender. Mary McCarten Wearn explains that:

The stakes and status of maternity, then, increased immensely in this era, and by mid-century motherhood was no longer considered just one among many feminine duties, but became, for better or worse, the defining role of most women's lives. The cultural tendency to conflate womanhood and motherhood would have profound and pervasive social ramifications in the nineteenth century and beyond. [Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2008) p. 2]

The ramifications would be felt by all women whether mothers or assumed potential future mothers. The nation was metaphorically and literally watching how mothers raised their sons and daughters. Thus, this project's goal is to concentrate on motherhood primarily as an institution in family discourse, and trope in literature and film, in an effort to avoid the conflation of these two overlapping, but distinct constructs. It is most concerned with deconstructing the messages disseminated through these images in literature and film and exploring how, if at all, black women writers challenged or encouraged this information.

Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) argument that black women's work as consumers and producers is integral to their ability to critique and

²⁶ Feldstein, p. 18.

construct meanings in literature and film as an “interpretive community” is one that this research will borrow. Bobo asserts:

Black women’s challenge to cultural domination is part of an activist movement that works to improve the conditions of their lives. Included in the movement are black female cultural producers, critics and scholars, and cultural consumers. As a group, the women make up what I have termed an interpretive community, which is strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by black women or feature them in significant ways. Working together the women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways. [Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) p. 22]

As an interpretive community, black women not only speak for and about black women, this research argues that they construct their own meanings about motherhood relative to the time period that they are writing and not as a supplement to images of white motherhood.

Outlining the Project Ahead

In order to address the issues presented above, this research will engage three sites of exploration where the discourses about mothering provide different avenues for examining the complexities of black motherhood-academic, film and novel. Another part of the cultural work that must also be reconsidered in motherhood discourse is the

construction of black fatherhood/masculinity in particular how, according to bell hooks, “the major barriers impeding our capacity as black people to collectively challenge sexism and sexist oppression is the continued equation of black liberation with the development of black patriarchy...the problem lies with the insistence that the redemptive family be patriarchal”.²⁷

This dissertation will examine how this idea is both developed and challenged in the three discourses. The following chapters primarily use content and textual analysis in order to examine the messages generated from historical, visual, and literary areas of interest. Each novel I chose to use in this dissertation was done so because I feel they capture the political and gendered spirit of the moment in which they were written. Likewise, I do a textual analysis of two films/and a play that are groundbreaking in their use of either African American protagonists or racial and political subject matters.

In the second chapter, I investigate the early growth of the Birth Control Federation under the leadership of Margaret Sanger in 1930s and 1940s in order to show how pejorative perceptions of African American mothers caste them as unfit. I look at John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life* (1934) and how the black mother is constructed in relation to the white mother. I also critique the construction of black motherhood as it is developed in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946). In chapter three, I explore the 1960s and Daniel P. Moynihan’s now famous report on the Black family.

Although Moynihan came under fire from black women and some men for his scathing characterization of black mothers, the rhetoric in his report is surprisingly similar to Black Nationalist rhetoric during the sixties. I explore how Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) predates the Moynihan Report, yet is able to

²⁷ Bell Hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995) pp. 69-71.

capture the changes the next decade would bring for African Americans. I also do a textual analysis of Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) in order to highlight one black woman writer's shift from the political novel to her concentration on the black woman subject. Finally, chapter six examines the second wave of black feminism and its part in documenting and canonizing black women's history and scholarship. Similarly, I explore what the next generation of black feminists is saying about motherhood. I investigate the very popular film *Claudine* (1974) and how it tells the story of how poor black families are abused within the welfare system. Lastly, I explore the development of everyday black mother's creativity and artistry through the eyes of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984).

Broader Meanings

As this dissertation progresses, I believe that its long term importance will reside in its interdisciplinary and comparative strengths. Although this is not an exhaustive study, my research did not yield a text on black motherhood that locates it historically, theoretically, and culturally. This work's significance will be in its examination of all three in order to complicate our study of black motherhood with a more complex model for analysis. As an interdisciplinary approach, this research, much like other scholarship in American Studies, should be viewed as a starting point for more complicated investigations of black motherhood. Another reason why this work is significant is because it joins the growing body of research that is locating black women's intellectual traditions specifically within a discursive history. The study of black motherhood lends

itself to an interdisciplinary analysis as it brings together issues surrounding race, gender, class, sexuality, and politics.

Chapter 2 ~ Foremothers

Yet when black women speak, if they are heard at all, their thoughtful assertions often are viewed as issuing from nowhere, lacking theoretical substance, disconnected from long-standing systems of classic Western thought...Since the intellectual productions of women, and especially black women, often have been *silenced*, making these theorists heard and recognized is of central importance. Self-generated and authentic “voices” constitute a powerful means of reclaiming the territory of black women’s intellectual production.

-Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters, *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions* (2007)

To better understand the messages produced about black motherhood and their impact in the United States, this chapter will begin by examining how many first generation black feminists from the late nineteenth century used motherhood to explore the intersections of race, class and gender. The literature discussed herein consider the meanings of motherhood for first generation feminists and what I call its use as a *rhetorical mirror* that was to offer white Americans a reflection of themselves and a more complicated reflection of slavery’s unpleasant sexual history. The social sciences were not teeming with black women intellectuals in the late nineteenth century. For the most part, black women did not make up the faculty at major universities after Reconstruction. Even the noted Anna Julia Cooper, who earned her Ph. D. from the University of Paris, Sorbonne, in France was only the fourth African American woman to do so but never graced the steps of a major university as a faculty member. Thus, their

activist/intellectual work and speeches were overlooked in the discourse and even when their intellectual property was used by men, they rarely received the proper credit.²⁸

The brief literature review to follow will explore the following questions: Were early black feminists examining motherhood in a systematic way? What did these women say about motherhood? Did early black feminists locate the institution within a broader context of resistance or politics? Finally, did early black feminists have an audience? Most importantly, by analyzing black motherhood as it is (de)constructed by late nineteenth century black feminists, this chapter will locate the relevant historical moments that capture the nuances of the intellectual tradition.

Contextualizing Black Motherhood

As a show of support and representative of the Richmond, Virginia chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), Senator John Williams of Mississippi put forward a bill to the United States Senate “requesting a site in the nation’s capitol for ‘the erection as a gift to the people of the United States...a monument in memory of the faithful colored mammies of the South.’” When these plans became known to black clubwomen, they protested vehemently. Hallie Q. Brown, in 1923, fired off an editorial in the *National Notes* rebuking the very idea of such a monument being constructed. Brown, in her letter, went so far as to scorn the UDC with a play on the idea of it being a stone monument, “all this in a land where a body of civilized, intelligent women would

²⁸ Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters, “Introduction” in *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2007) pp. 2-3.

erect a STONE to a class of dead saints for faithfulness when the living descendants cry for succor, for a fair chance in life....The proper inscription for that monument should be ‘They asked for bread and ye gave them a stone.’”²⁹ In the same year, Mary Church Terrell wrote in the *Washington Evening Star*, “Colored women all over the United States stand aghast at the idea of erecting a black mammy monument.”

The public representation of mammy worked on multiple levels, aside from understanding her place of servitude to whites, mammy simultaneously dominated her own loved ones and placed the needs of whites above that of her own community; for black women, the image was a reminder of how black females on plantations were sexually victimized by white men and how they were denied authority as mothers to their children. For black clubwomen and men, a false image of compliant slaves was not how they wanted African American’s history to be memorialized. For one to be able to understand the power of this image, we must investigate the overall issue of cultural representation through what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “controlling images.” In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) it is significant that mammy as a controlling image, operates as a cultural signifier “as easily recognized and much maligned, a type which invariably tends toward stereotype”.³⁰ Furthermore, the issue of representation is one mainly about power. Collins articulates it as such,

²⁹ Joan Marie Johnson, “‘Ye Gave Them a Stone’: African American Women’s Clubs, the Frederick Douglass Home, and the Black Mammy Monument,” in *Journal of Women’s History* 17.1 (2005): 62-86.

³⁰ Trudier Harris, “On Southern and Northern Maids: Geography, Mammies, and Militants,” in *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), p. 23; Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007); Kimberly Wallace Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning Black women.

Collins goes on to explain how this is done,

They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or they may create new ones relevant to their needs...These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.³¹

Hence, the construction and manipulation of the image is more about who has the power to establish, control, and maintain the image than the subjects being objectified. The following sections explore the ways in which black feminists have used the racial/economic disparities between black and white mothers as a platform for activism.

Black Feminist Activism and Motherhood

Nineteenth century black feminists directly tackled race and class politics as it related to motherhood in theory and praxis. As part of black women's intellectual tradition, the theme of womanhood/motherhood was reoccurring in their writings and for others, speeches. As a platform for activism, late nineteenth century black feminists envisioned their vigorous pursuits to achieve a political or social end in different ways.

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1990) pp. 67-90.

Many women became clubwomen—they organized around certain pillars that allowed them to explore issues ranging in significance from childrearing to literature to fundraising. While the work of black clubwomen has been well documented, I argue that it also allowed the patriarchal power structure to pay them little attention, understanding and relegating their work to be characterized as *only* good civic duties appropriate for women.

On the other hand, feminist Anna Julia Cooper, wrote what is considered the cornerstone text of black feminists theory in *A Voice from the South* (1892). She details in *Voice from the South* the work, education, and religious condition of African American women in the south. Cooper presented a way in which black women self-defined in response to white prejudices and chauvinism while simultaneously, laying the groundwork in early perspectives of black feminist theorizing.³² As slaves, women were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. They were, as Cooper claimed, legally “unprotected” and even after slavery had ended, were subject to public ridicule that blamed them for the second-class citizenship of black Americans, the lack of morality and stability in African American households, black men’s *failings* and some written accounts went so far as to accuse African American women for being the cause of their own rape, but calling it seduction.³³

At any rate, Cooper unashamedly wrote in 1892,

³² I intentionally use the term “theorizing” here instead of feminist theory in accordance with Barbara Christians’s distinction between theory as a hegemonic construct used as a noun versus theorizing, which implies action.

³³ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1892); Farah Jasmine Griffin. “Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000): 34-39.

Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the re-training of the race, as well as the ground work, and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman*...With all the wrongs and neglects of her past, with all the weakness, the debasement, the moral thralldom of her present (the black woman)...No other hand can move the lever. She must be loosed from her bands and set to work. Our meager and superficial results from past efforts prove their futility; and every attempt to elevate the Negro, whether undertaken by himself or the philanthropy of others, cannot but prove abortive unless so directed as to utilize the indispensable agency of an elevated and trained womanhood."³⁴

Here, she asserts a key tenant of feminism-an educated womanhood which includes her ability to obtain work outside of the home and alongside men. Cooper did not divorce the concept of womanhood from motherhood in *A Voice from the South*. This point is made clear when she argues,

Stream cannot rise higher than its source. The atmosphere of homes is no rarer and purer and sweeter than are the mothers in those homes. A race is but a total of families. The nation is the aggregate of its homes...As the whole is the sum of all its parts, so the character of the parts will determine the characteristics of the whole... Martin R. Delany, used to say...when he entered the council of kings the black race entered with him...But our present record of eminent men, when placed beside the actual status of the race in America to-day, proves that no man can represent the race. Whatever the attainments of the individual may

³⁴ Cooper, *Voice*, pp. 28-29.

be...he can never be regarded as identical with or representative of the whole.³⁵

For Cooper, no male could represent the race because mothers were the source of all of its attainment. In other words, the race will not transcend its roots-the mother. That Anna Julia Cooper received little attention for *A Voice from the South* from her fellow social scientists has been acknowledged, however, her scholarship did not go unnoticed.

W.E.B. Du Bois' oft-cited "The Damnation of Women" in *Darkwater* (1920) has been widely accepted by black feminists as the text that clearly positions Du Bois as a feminist scholar.³⁶ His contribution to the field is well-noted and were it not for the attention his writings on black womanhood garnered, the literary tradition to combat some negative stereotypes about womanhood/motherhood would have developed much later. However, this chapter will examine Du Bois' work in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). In it, he gathers statistical information on the work and family life of black people living in Philadelphia's seventh ward.³⁷

Du Bois paid particular attention to the "conjugal" or family making patterns of those living in Philadelphia. His research centered on what he believed was unique to African American men and women; the decision to remain single. He deduced that their decision involved the lack of economic means that would allow them to properly support a family. However, he also pointed out that for some others who remained single and chose to cohabitate, this came about as a result of "lax moral habits of the slave regime,"

³⁵Ibid., pp. 29-30.

³⁶Griffin, *Black Feminists*, pp. 29-30.

³⁷W.E.B. DuBois. *The Philadelphia Negro*, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007.

which he argued is a relic of the former plantation life most were exposed to prior to the Civil War. The “unchastity” of these single women lead to children born out of wedlock and an “increase(d) burden of charity and benevolence, and also on account of their poor home life to increase crime.”³⁸

Du Bois’ critique of black motherhood was far different from that of Cooper. His argument continued as such,

When we remember that in slavery-time slaves usually began to cohabit at an early age...Negro girls no longer marry in their ‘teens as their mothers and grandmothers did...So sudden a change in marriage customs means grave-dangers...From all these statistics...we may conclude: 1. That a tendency to much later marriage than under the slave system is revolutionizing the Negro family and incidentally leading to much irregularity...4.

The very large number of widowed and separated points to grave physical, economic and moral disorder (sic). DuBois concluded his findings with noting, “first it must be remembered that the Negro home and the stable marriage state is for the mass of the colored people of the country and for a large percent of those in Philadelphia, a new social institution. The strictly guarded savage home life of Africa, which with all its shortcomings protected womanhood, was broken up completely by the slave ship...”³⁹

The difference between Du Bois’ focus and that of his female contemporaries was that although each were concerned about black women’s “chastity,” early black feminists better understood the nuances underlying sexuality, gender, power and politics. Though

³⁸ W.E.B. DuBois. *The Philadelphia Negro*. (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), pgs. 66-72.

³⁹ Ibid.

nineteenth century black clubwomen also worked to uplift the moral character of more downtrodden women (mainly through their work in the temperance movement), they were able to make distinctions and critique the oppressive conditions that led to women becoming single mothers from a perceived lifestyle choice.

Black vs. White Feminists and Uncommon Sites

In order to further complicate hegemonic constructs that dictate what constitutes theory, this research posits that the cultural work late nineteenth century black feminists did in their communities as it considered motherhood should be included as part of their long intellectual tradition.⁴⁰ Since nineteenth century women had little access to mixed gendered audiences, they shared their work with other women. It is within this context that black feminist's theory concerning motherhood was primarily addressed. The mother of the anti-lynching campaign and journalist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrestled with the role of motherhood for feminists within this context.

In her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (1970), Wells-Barnett tells of 1903 meeting she organized for clubwomen. The seminar put together for the Douglass Women's Club, titled "What It Means to be a Mother," had four invited speakers.⁴¹ They included women of the arts, religion, the law, and even Wells-Barnett spoke from her perspective on the subject. It was, as she called it, her "reentry into club life."⁴²

⁴⁰ Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies 1890-1950*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006) p. 95.

⁴¹ In 1903, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, along with other white club-women, founded the Frederick Douglass Center in Chicago.

According to Wells-Barnett, it was quite successful, and the speakers were met with an enthusiastic response from the group of mostly African American women in the audience. Unfortunately, Wells-Barnett does not record in her autobiography the details of what she or the other women expressed in that “glorious” meeting. It must have struck a nerve with those of the opposing view because immediately afterwards, Mrs. Celia Parker Wooley, a white Unitarian pastor and philanthropist responsible for funding the center for the Douglass Women’s Club was contacted and asked to address the crowd.

Mrs. Wooley, pointedly remarked, “Well, there isn’t so much in the mere physical fact of being a mother. Some of the most influential women workers for humanity have not been mothers.” According to Wells-Barnett’s autobiography, Mrs. Wooley proceeded to run down a list of women like Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams of Hull House, and Mary McDowell along with others who fell into this category.⁴³ Needless to say, Wells-Barnett was greatly disappointed in the response from Wooley, and considered her comments amounting to throwing “a dash of cold water on the enthusiasm” she had provoked.

More than likely, Wooley did not appreciate Wells-Barnett’s *feminist* reading of the institution of motherhood and from her impression, concluded that Wells-Barnett was “not being given much leeway in the affairs of the center.” The founding and what for Wells-Barnett amounted to a lackluster existence of the Frederick Douglass Center, after she absented her role as Vice-President, was the beginning of an uneasy realization. The ultimate affect of having other run-ins with Wooley and the center’s white President,

⁴² Wells-Barnett, Ida B., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 282-283.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Mrs. George W. Plummer, solidified Wells-Barnett's overall impression of the race relations within the women's club movement. She asserted in her autobiography, "I came to the conclusion before our relations ended that our white women friends were not willing to treat us on a plane of equality with themselves."⁴⁴

For certain, Wells-Barnett's new found consciousness and respect for the institution of motherhood must not have been the perspective many clubwomen wanted reflected in their movement at the turn of the twentieth century. It was the domestic sphere, which women had been bound to for centuries, which some (white) clubwomen rejected outright, as alluded to in Wooley's response to Wells-Barnett. According to her autobiography, the reason she chose the topic of motherhood for her symposium was that Wells-Barnett "felt that the experience I had gained as a mother should be passed on to the young women of our race who had the *idea* (emphasis added) that they should not have children."⁴⁵

Her "reentry into club life" was marked by her desire to impart into young African American women an alternative model from that of Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams, a model that included women like her, who were professional mothers. In fact, Wells-Barnett considered the role of mother as a professional calling. In *Crusade for Justice* she asserted, "I had already found that motherhood was a profession by itself, just like school teaching and lecturing, and that once one was launched on such a career, she owed it to herself to become as expert as possible in the practice of her profession".⁴⁶ Even the other women invited to speak to the members of the Douglass Women's Club

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wells-Barnett, pp. 250-251.

were included in Wells-Barnett's broader perspective of this practice. Not by mistake, Wells-Barnett placed emphasis on the speaker's chosen professions, not husbands, unlike Mrs. Wooley and Mrs. Plummer (who, in her autobiography, she never referred to by her first name, only her husband's).

However, before Wells-Barnett married she admitted in *Crusade for Justice* that her own initial feelings of childrearing were less than eager. Wells-Barnett, explained "my early entrance into public life and the turning of my efforts, physical and mental, in that direction had something to do with smothering the mother instinct." Another deterrent may have also been that "having had the care of small children from the time I was big enough to hold a baby also had its effect."⁴⁷ In the former explanation, Wells-Barnett revealed the paradoxical relationship pioneering women in the feminist movement had to the prospect of mothering. The public work of uplifting the race, which was in its most practical sense about carving out more, better, and safer opportunities for the next generation, also provided black clubwomen with an opportunity to avoid or deter marriage and childbirth. Indeed, Wells-Barnett, herself, married at the age of 33 and gave birth to her first of four children just nine months later!

Wells-Barnett's run-in with Wooley would not be the only time she would be taken to task for her decision to marry and have children. For Wells-Barnett and others, movement and activism would continue as a result of, not in spite of motherhood. After she married fellow anti-lynching activist, Ferdinand Barnett, Wells-Barnett had her first baby and according to historian, Paula Giddings, was able to "strike a balance" between the dual roles of mother and activist. By the time she had had her second child she was

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 251

off campaigning on behalf of the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) with nursing six-month-old son in tow for the 1896 election.⁴⁸ Wells-Barnett was a woman ahead of her time who did not fall into simplistic categories of gender roles that would suggest that a woman's greatest work could not be done after she had become a mother, held by feminist organizer, Susan B. Anthony, who chastised Wells-Barnett for succumbing to the institution. Anthony argued:

...women like you who have a special call for work [should never marry]. I know of no one in all this country better fitted to do the work you had in hand. Since you've gotten married, agitation seems practically to have ceased. Besides you're trying to help in the formation of this league and your baby needs your attention at home. You're distracted over the thought that he's not being looked after as he would be if you were there, and that makes for a divided duty.⁴⁹

Possibly, what Anthony did not understand was that for Wells-Barnett and some other black feminists, marrying and raising a family was not a "divided duty". Activism and family were not viewed as being in opposition to one another; instead, each encouraged the other. Patricia Hill Collins explains "divided duty" this way,

Historically African Americans' resistance to racial oppression could not have occurred without an occupying struggle for group survival...Without this key part of Black women's activism, struggles to transform American

⁴⁸ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, (New York: Batam Books, 1984) pp. 110-111.

⁴⁹ Ibid. pg.111

educational, economic, and political institutions could not have been sustained.⁵⁰

Still, Wells-Barnett would have answered Anthony with her own interpretation of womanhood,

What I am trying to say now is that I had to become a mother before I realized what a wonderful place in the scheme of things the Creator has given woman. She it is upon whom rests the joint share of the work of creation, and I wonder if women who shirk their duties in that respect truly realize that they have not only deprived humanity of their contribution to perpetuity, but that they have robbed themselves of one of the most glorious advantages in the development in their own womanhood.

As one of the most popular journalist of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Wells-Barnett was established as a masterful rhetorician.⁵¹ Her comments should be read as more than a sentimental musing in her autobiography. For, when she declared, women who “shirk their duties” have somehow neglected to realize their full-potential as women, it should not be taken as a rejection of the sacrifices her contemporaries had made, instead, and I argue that her response illustrated the need for the feminist movement to broaden its interpretation of women’s empowerment and the direction of the movement. On the surface, her comments about duty, work of Creation and perpetuity do not elicit a feminist interpretation, and rightly so, instead her rhetoric

⁵⁰ Collins pg.140

⁵¹ Even before Wells-Barnett’s popularity from her involvement in the anti-lynching campaign, she was an established and sought-after journalist. For more on her early life as journalist see [The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells.](#)

more fully interweaves the role of mothers with an inherent position of authority and lineage, with work, race consciousness and womanhood.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the intellectual tradition of black feminists on the subject of motherhood in the late nineteenth-century. By highlighting this tradition, this chapter provides a background for some of the broad descriptions about black motherhood that surround the ones to be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapters. The information here moves between presenting the foremothers of feminism, contextualizing black motherhood, black feminist's activism versus motherhood, black versus white feminism and exploring uncommon sites for theoretical constructions.

In this chapter's brief examination of the lives and some of the writings of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, it is the case that motherhood and womanhood are often conflated, but this was done in an effort to establish social and cultural agency. Both women critique the institution of black motherhood in ways that prioritize the necessity of women's public work, but it is not done at the expense or exclusion of their private lives. What their writings tell us about motherhood for nineteenth century black women is that the public work black women did for the race and the private work they did for their families were not at intellectual odds and for some, a natural extension of the other.

By examining this intellectual tradition and exploring the particulars of black motherhood, this chapter sets the foundation for the chapters to come that take as their

point of analysis, the sociological, novel and filmic discourses. Although, this research is not exhaustive, it is important to understand how cultural critics, writers, and filmmakers have theorized and described black motherhood from the past to the present. This chapter situates the dissertation within the growing field of black women's studies, as well as feminists and American studies. That backdrop provided here is important in order to understand that motherhood may not have been the dream of all 19th and early 20th century black women, but all that were organized were concerned about generations to come.

Chapter Three~

The Birth Control Federation and Feminized Poverty in the New Deal Era

In very tangible ways, the 1920s and 1930s were two of the most influential decades for African Americans. For both decades, there would be at least three overarching discourses that would impact the quality of life for African Americans. First, we would here from public intellectuals on multiple fronts like the newly established Birth Control Federation lead by activist, Margaret Sanger. Secondly, the Harlem Renaissance, which took place in Harlem, New York, became the site of a collective presence of black creative talent that would impact the world. Thirdly, the backdrop for the first two would be the government's answer to the harsh economic decline of the 1930s, the New Deal.

The economic Depression in the 1930s, lead to new public policy and government programs that were designed to help America's poorest citizens get jobs, food, and shelter. Named the New Deal, it did not respond to the needs of all of America's citizens equally. African Americans were shut out of many of the opportunities that would have made job security certain. Working mothers were chastised for stealing jobs from men. The limited industrial jobs available were reserved for white men and European immigrant women were even given domestic jobs that had typically gone to black women.

Another major characteristic of the 1930s was the founding of the Birth Control Federation. This chapter focuses on the start of the Birth Control Movement, led by Margaret Sanger, and the restricted involvement of leading African American sociologists like W. E. B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier. Though the movement

provided all women with safer alternatives of birth control with help from members of the medical field, it too addressed the needs of white women and black women unequally. Many African Americans were suspicious of the birth control clinics entering their communities and even with leading black supporters like DuBois, Frazier and others, African American women were still not convinced that white doctors and nurses had their best interest in mind.

Additionally, black people's intolerance about the questionable quality of healthcare they received was tied to a broader spirit of resistance. The decade of the 1920s ushered in with it the artistic and cultural revival called the Harlem Renaissance. For many urban African Americans during this time, Harlem, with its artistic explosion, provided artists with venues to display their work, writers, journals to publish their work and a community of other likeminded people that would all become part of the Harlem Renaissance. Though the timing of the Renaissance is contested by some, this research argues that the Renaissance began in 1920 and because writers like Hurston, and Hughes were still publishing well passed this point and attached themselves to the movement, the Harlem Renaissance extended into the 1930s.⁵²

Thus, the literature and films that came out of the Harlem Renaissance were laden with images of the New Negro, a phrased coined by scholar, Alain Locke. Symbolically, the New Negro was more urban, young, and most importantly, more militant than his/her predecessors. Ann Petry's novel, *The Street* is an example of this. *The Street* was about an urban, single mother struggling to survive the evil that tries to destroy her family and was the first novel by a black woman to sell over a million copies. Popular discourse in

⁵² Cary Wintz, introduction to *Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

film like John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934) became the first mainstream film featuring two black women in leading roles (alongside two white actresses) that challenged, complicated, while simultaneously perpetuating negative stereotypes of black motherhood. This chapter will explore the significance of each in public discourse. In sum, the livelihood of African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s would undergo change, but change would come at a high price for black women.

E. Franklin Frazier's Research on Black Families during New Deal Reforms

As these studies related to gender and even motherhood, according to historian Ruth Feldstein, there would come to be three related changes” that would alter “the meanings of motherhood in the 1930s...”⁵³ First, experts in various disciplines came to a consensus that mothers were not only responsible for the physical, educational, and religious well-being of future citizens, but were also responsible for their children’s psychological well-being...“A second difference apparent by the 1930s was that good and bad women were not easily divided along private and public lines. The idealization of white motherhood in the nineteenth century was largely based on a series of divisions: motherhood versus work, home versus workplace, private versus public, and of course female versus male...By the 1930s ‘bad’ women were not just ‘out there’. Experts no longer labeled women dangerous, bad, unwomanly, and unmaternal simply because they tried to wield power in the public sphere.”

⁵³ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 6.

Now experts criticized women and labeled them bad mothers because of their behavior in the home. Women became suspect because they wielded too much power in the private sphere as mothers... Third, the Depression triggered a profound crisis in liberalism, which in turn affected ideas about masculinity and femininity and about families and motherhood in new ways. A belief in progress, individual initiative and economic mobility, and equality of opportunity to all those who worked hard-the very foundations of American democracy and a liberal capitalist work ethic- was under assault when year after year men could not find work, feed their kin, or keep their homes. New Deal liberalism developed to address these concerns in ways that made maternal behavior central.⁵⁴

The New Deal era, most notable for social security and aid to the poor government programs that were products of New Deal reforms also ushered in with it a view of gender roles that defined masculinity and femininity more distinctly and succinctly. White women working outside of the home because their spouses were unemployed were the enemy of men and the country. Even white men were considered less masculine by social workers assigned to help their families when they failed to find work or broke down and cried in front of them. However, the needs of black families would still largely go ignored or at the most, get what was left over after white men and families had been helped first. Unfortunately, black women, who were already working outside (and inside) of the home would come to understand the higher price for their deviant behavior for decades to come.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-34.

Moreover, it could not have been a coincidence that at the very time the country was going through its largest economic crisis to date, messages about black family organization was increasingly scrutinized. To be clear, within the New Deal what was taking place was the establishment of lines of demarcation solidifying the deserving and undeserving poor. In other words, the federal government solidified who it would help based on racial distinctions. Most whites were deserving of government aid, while messages focused on the African American family's struggle were laden with signifiers like "disorganized," and "lazy." For example, Feldstein writes,

Because the New Deal permitted states to establish local guidelines, state administrators were able to exclude black women from the ranks of ADC... 'Suitable home' and 'employable mother' were among the provisions that local white administrators used to disqualify black women and keep them in a poorly paying workforce.⁵⁶

Thus, the message behind this was one that essentially argued that African American families were expendable.

Black families, but specifically African American women, would gain new scholarly attention as well. In *The Negro Family in the United States*, public intellectual and black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier examined what appeared to be the causal factors behind the collapse of the black family unit before and after the civil war. Arguably, the first major academic discussion centering on black women by means of the family was established in the work of Frazier.⁵⁷ Born in Baltimore in 1894, Frazier became a pioneering figure in the field of sociology when he became the first African

⁵⁶ Ibid. 34-37.

⁵⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

American elected president of the American Sociological Society in 1948. Frazier focused his research on the urbanization of blacks in southern cities. His major contribution to the social sciences included examinations of social organization, cultural relationships, urbanization, stratification, and human ecology. All of which he used to better understand and study the black family and race relations.⁵⁸

Moreover, he concluded that prior to the civil war, unlike Africans sent to places like the West Indies and South America, that because of the way those sent to America were distributed and sold, there was very little opportunity for them to retain traditional familial customs. As it was, Africans from the same tribal group, once they arrived in America, were split up, sold and sent to different counties and states; thus, making it difficult to continue customary practices akin to their homeland. He continued, by explaining that following the civil war, the practice of having children out of wedlock became more prevalent and accepted in some rural and urban centers.⁵⁹

It was these mothers that seemed to have little concern for the dominant mores established by white families, which Frazier focused on. Consequently, the ‘matriachate’ would also become more prevalent after slavery; however, this familial structure would be one such pattern, Frazier would argue began during slavery and would carry over after emancipation. Frazier’s arguments ultimately boiled down to those African Americans who being constituted of a more “naïve” character simply had little respect or regard for dominate cultural mores. This disregard was in large part due to the reversal of roles

⁵⁸ G. Franklin Edwards, “E. Franklin Frazier,” in *Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. James E. Blackwell and Morris Janowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 85.

⁵⁹ Frazier, *Family*, pp. 5-7.

started during slavery in which bonded women who had “doubtless been schooled in self-reliance and self-sufficiency” were able to assert their own will over the cabin, which “in regard to mating and family matters (their wishes) were paramount”. Most importantly, and crucial to his argument was an effort to firmly situate black family patterns in the history of slavery. Frazier explained that, “As regards to the Negro family, there is no reliable evidence that African culture has had any influence on its development”.⁶⁰

African’s experiences during slavery were important for another reason as well. It was during this time that black men and women formulated distinct gender roles according to Frazier. He examined the position of the mother in the home within enslaved communities, their unique bond with their children, and the women’s survival techniques on the plantation as concubines and mistresses to white men. Though this research will touch on Frazier’s examination of some black women’s experiences on the plantation, what is more germane to this paper is how he later connects black women’s role in the family pre-bellum to the overall health of the institution post slavery. Moreover, it is his analysis of the increase of illegitimate births amongst newly freed slaves in the south and claims of family disorganization due to their female-headedness that most concern this research.

The Negro Family in the United States located the black mother’s significance on the plantation to the “work” she does in the home of the white planter. Frazier asserted,

“...The idealized picture of the Negro Mother has not grown out of the stories of her sacrifices and devotion to her own children but has emerged

⁶⁰ Ibid. 8, 102-113.

from the tradition of the Negro mammy—a romantic figure in whom maternal love as a vicarious sentiment has become embodied”.⁶¹

He continued by looking at various testimonies from the journals/diaries of former planters and their children and from these accounts he commented on the sincerity of black women’s loyalty to their own children in comparison to their bond with their white charges as being biased towards the latter. According to Frazier, “There is plenty of evidence to give a solid background to the familiar picture—stories of cold, and often inhuman, indifference toward her (black mothers) own offspring and undying devotion to the children of the master race”.⁶² However, he did go on to state how “strange” these peculiar testimonies sound in the face of accounts that speak to the contrary.⁶³

Frazier’s comments would become even more provocative in his critique of the mulatto population in the south, pre and post civil war. According to Frazier, many black women did not need a lot of coaxing to engage in sexual relations with “men of the master race” prior to the civil war. He pointed to one example as told by a Miss Kemble,

The mere prestige of the white race was sufficient to secure compliance with their desires...the slaves accepted the contempt of their masters to such an extent that they profess, and really seem to feel if for themselves, and the faintest admixture of white blood in their veins appears at once, by common consent of their own race, to raise them in the scale of humanity.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Frazier, *Family*, 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.54-55

Frazier went on to argue that, "...there were often certain concrete advantages to be gained by surrendering themselves to the men of the master race that overcame any moral scruples these women might have had".⁶⁵ In sum, bonded women might have been able to look forward to less difficult labor and a better quality of life for them and their children on the plantation than if they had chosen to couple with a bonded man.⁶⁶

What he seemed to overlook is that even in what might appear to some, to be mutual intimate associations, was the underlying power dynamics apparent in those relationships. Had she the choice of developing a lasting relationship with an enslaved man, even in this instance she would have been counted as his subordinate, yet even this analysis must be complicated to allow for a varied understanding of gender roles within the household. Moreover, whatever roles she and her spouse chose for their family, one must examine them as evidence of self-determining aspects of their livelihood and consequently, temporal due to the threat of separation by sale or death.

Most certainly, as the laws dictated at the time (as it was for white women as well), her position of subordination would have gone without comment in a relationship with a white male. So, why choose white patriarchy over the sociological and practical obstacles that would appear to be associated with one who shares in her condition of servitude? Even if some bonded women preferred relations with their white masters, the issue of free choice is a complicated one. Frazier, himself, pointed out that for many of these women entering into these relationships may have lead to other benefits such as "food and clothing" possibly even freedom papers for her or her children. However, he

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ For an account of these complicated relations see Jacobs, *Incidents*, 6.

leaves it there without further investigation. The real issue it would seem is not so much about whom these women were sexually intimate with, but instead how we come to understand the act of choice, and power for women within a system of institutionalized gender and racial oppression. Plainly stated, a misreading of either of these facets opens the door to gross misperceptions of African American womanhood, sexuality, and motherhood.

Perception mattered because Frazier's research on black family structure and women's roles in their families along with other issues resulted in erroneous judgment calls. Anthropologist, Niara Sudarkasa, said it this way,

...Following Frazier's lead, they (other scholars) focused on only a few characteristics that were typical of less than one-third of the black families in America. Specifically, the debate centered on the origin of female-headed households, the "dominant" position of the mother within the family, the "high rate" of illegitimate birth, and the "ease" of separation and divorce. Although these features were not found in the majority of black families, they were taken as the ones that most sharply distinguished these families from their white counterparts. Over the years, these few characteristics of a minority of black families came to be regarded by many as the defining attributes of black American family organization.⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, it is in part because of early discussions about black family structure surrounding the myth of the black matriarch, illegitimate births, and sexual deviance that helped to shape public opinion, which was then reflected in the whole of public

⁶⁷ Niara Sudarkasa, "Roots of the Black Family: Comments on the History of a Debate on History," (*LSA Alumni Magazine* 5: 1982), p. 112.

representations of black women, how their reproductive concerns were considered, and their sexuality deconstructed. More specifically, the birth control movement in the United States would be the site where in which all three matters would intersect for African American women. Perhaps, no other female oriented organization would have as much bearing on the quality of life for all black women, regardless of class, as the Birth Control Federation of America.

Sociologists W.E.B. Du Bois and Frazier sat on the advisory board of the BCFA for Negro Issues. Founded by Margaret Sanger in 1921, the American Birth Control League merged with the Clinical Research Bureau and in 1939 established the BCFA. In fact, it was due to a comment Du Bois made that brought black women's reproductive needs to the attention of Sanger:

The mass of Negroes, particularly in the South, . . . still breed carelessly and disastrously, with the result that the increase among negroes, even more than among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear children properly. (Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* [New York: Vintage Books, 1997], 77)

As troubling as this statement may be, it is what drew Sanger to address the reproductive needs of black women and call upon Du Bois and Frazier, along with some others, to participate on the Advisory Board. Unfortunately, their positions were not much more than African American figureheads that were used to bring the movement credibility where clinics were set up in predominately black communities. Yet, Sanger's correspondence with Dr. Clarence J. Gamble does indicate that she understood the

precarious relationship between the movement and the women from these communities who were suspect of the intrusive white doctors.⁶⁸ In a letter, Margaret Sanger lays out to Dr. Gamble what their approach should be:

It seems to me from my experience...in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, that while the colored Negroes have great respect for white doctors, they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table, which means their ignorance, superstitions, and doubts. They do not do this with the white people...⁶⁹

Is it any wonder why black women didn't trust the BCFA! It is difficult to determine from this exchange if Sanger was simply a wise strategist or a condescending social activists. Nonetheless, despite their restricted power within the BCFA, black leaders were in favor of African American women making informed decisions about when and how they would become mothers. Frazier and Du Bois, more than likely, felt that their part in helping black women gain better access to birth control was necessary for the greater good of African Americans and raising the quality of life for black women and the health of black families.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Roberts, *Killing*, 77-78.

⁶⁹ Margaret Sanger to Clarence J. Gamble, Dec. 10, 1939, p. 2. Margaret Sanger Collection, Library of Congress (MSCLC).

⁷⁰ There were several troubling aspects surrounding the founding of the BCFA. The Eugenics movement, which began around the time of Sanger's birth control efforts, involved what Dorothy Roberts described as the "rational control of reproduction in order to improve society". In other words, scientists, academics and physicians advocated and practiced government sanctioned sterilizations upon unsuspecting men and women for decades prior to the seventies. Sterilization was thought a necessary procedure in America so that those individuals deemed "undesirable" such as the mentally and physically challenged, along with those who simply suffered from epileptic seizures would not reproduce. This practice would later be expanded to include black men and women whose medical needs did not warrant such severe treatment.

This is not to say that Du Bois and Frazier did not disagree with some of the BCFA's policies, in fact, they, along with other well-known African American leaders, were already critical of the birth control movement because of its exploitation and violation of black women's bodies and its continuous failure to adequately and respectfully address the specific concerns of black women and their communities.⁷¹ For instance, sociologist, Dorothy Roberts pointed out that "Du Bois and other Blacks active in the birth control movement adamantly opposed sterilization, the chief tool of eugenicists".⁷² Consequently, the opposition to sterilization by black leaders may have a direct link to the fact that, although Frazier and Du Bois, along with others, were supporters of black women gaining access to birth control, actually had limited say so within the movement.⁷³

Summarily, African American women did benefit from the BCFA overall despite its surreptitious relationship with the Eugenics movement. Once African American doctors were no longer prevented from providing them birth control, some black women utilized this tool in order to increase their quality of life. Perhaps, another effect the BCFA had on American culture was through popular images of women as working and living independently of men. By the late thirties, fewer than 1 million women belonged in unions. For certain, this was in part due to the outbreak of World War II during the late thirties. One of the most provocative images of women was "Rosie the Riveter", a World War II poster with the signature touting "We Can Do It," urging women to help in

⁷¹ Roberts, *Killing*, 77.

⁷² Roberts, 86.

⁷³ Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey, spoke out against the BCFA because he felt it was a genocidal tool used by Eugenics to exterminate the black race.

the war effort. In film, gender roles for black and white women would be concurrently progressive and stagnant. John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* is a clear example of how America struggled with the reality of (white) women living without men, while fearing that black women would literally give birth to discontent.

Mammy Goes Hollywood in John Stahl's 1934 Imitation of Life

Films like *Imitation of life* (1934 and 1959 versions) and *Pinky* (1949), depicted African American women and motherhood as (racially) tragic, sacrificial, and homogenous. It would go a step further by illustrating that while black motherhood would exist as the antithesis to white motherhood, at least in the instance of the film, black mothers would also come to embody the means by which social order would be maintained and the image of black poverty feminized and perverted, while their offspring were seen as suspect and uncontrollable. Moreover, although this project does not argue that Mammy and motherhood are synonymous, a brief examination of this stereotype is necessary in order to better understand the manipulation of black female identities in public discourses.

Thus, the image of Mammy, (who was loyal to whites, reared and loved white children while rejecting her own) would always understand her place as subordinate, representing a crucial piece in societal hierarchy. Moreover, black motherhood in film became caricatured and reinforced an important ideology in American society. Lastly, this research argues that historically, African American womanhood has been devalued,

but ironically in early representations of twentieth century motherhood, black mother's role in the family is esteemed and pitiable.⁷⁴

The historical context within which African American motherhood is played out in popular discourse such as film and television spawns an ideological framework of oppression, suppression, and racism. Our first images of African American motherhood in popular film were little more than black women working as mammies, domestics or laundresses for white families while trying to raise their own children, alone (most often).⁷⁵ Images of black women in film were not even initially black women, but instead white men in black face dressed up to look like women. Obviously, none of these representations reflected how African American women viewed themselves as women, mothers or otherwise.

The 1934 version of *Imitation of Life* appeared in popular culture at a peculiar time in American history. The Harlem Renaissance of the twenties had not long passed and black writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen and many others were publishing works at a greater rate than at any other time before in history. Not only were African American writers enjoying success, but it was also the first appearance of black journals like *Opportunity*, *Crisis* and the short lived *Fire* in the publishing world. It was a time that many black intellectuals benefited from white America's newfound curiosity with their darker-skinned neighbors, and even for

⁷⁴ Feldstein, *Motherhood*, 12-33.

⁷⁵ Even though there were black film companies like the one developed by Oscar Mischeaux, the films produced by Mischeaux and others were shown to limited audiences.

the masses of black people the quality of life had increased if only due to the number of lynchings that were on the decline during that decade.⁷⁶

In contrast, the 1930s would introduce a very different reality for all black people living in America. The stock market crash of 1929 set the stage for mass unemployment, poverty, and homelessness in the U.S. The Depression affected all of its citizens, but African Americans would suffer sooner and more harshly than their white counterparts in most parts of the country. Once employment became scarce, white groups began to retaliate against African Americans by using mob violence that in many instances ended in lynching. Historian, William Trotter, described the situation as one most dire for those most vulnerable:

In the urban South, blacks faced even greater difficulties than their northern kinfolk. In Atlanta, New Orleans, and other southern cities, white workers rallied around such slogans as “No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job” and “Niggers, back to the cotton field-city jobs are for white folks.” By early 1933, the most violent efforts to displace black workers had occurred on southern railroads, where the white brotherhoods intimidated, attacked, and murdered nearly a dozen black firemen.⁷⁷

This type of racial hatred along with exploitation was not limited to black men in the workplace. For black women, those working in factories and other positions, found themselves out of work as well and the domestic jobs that had always seem to be

⁷⁶ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *The African American Experience* (New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001) pp. 438-439; Valade 165-166.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p.438.

prevalent, were now being reserved for European immigrants. Noted by writers and civil rights activists, Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke in 1935, this atmosphere opened the door for what they referred to as the new “slave market”.⁷⁸ Baker and Cooke wrote a telling report called “The Bronx Slave Market,” which described the desperate situation for black domestic workers during the Depression. These women may not have been domestics prior to the Depression but due to the lack of employment in unskilled markets, women in urban areas were forced to labor in domestic service. Many were hired and worked under treacherous conditions for little pay, but only if their employer chose to do so. The women, being driven by economic necessity, are lead to the “slave market”, “...the Simpson Avenue block exudes the stench of the slave market at its worst. Not only is human labor bartered and sold for slave wage, but human love also is a marketable commodity. But whether it is labor or love that is sold, economic necessity compels the sale”.⁷⁹ This was the reality for many urban domestics, but Hollywood, through the filming of *Imitation of Life*, found a way to romanticize the unromantic and augment an image of black domestics, like Delilah, that would be exalted in American film for decades.

These images were not used to uplift or to inspire black women as mothers; instead, they were used to perpetuate an ideology of cultural inferiority. Ironically enough, the first images we see in mainstream film where black motherhood is a crucial element to the story had less to do with her as a woman than as a mother. More to point,

⁷⁸ Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, “The Bronx Slave Market” in *The Crisis* (November, 1935). Ella Baker would also later become a leading civil rights activist during the sixties working as the president of the New York branch of the NAACP and then becoming national director of branches. She would also go on to become the coordinator of the SCLC.

⁷⁹ Baker and Cooke, *Bronx*, 330.

in early popular films, such as both versions of *Imitation of Life* and *Pinky*, the prevailing image in the dichotomous relationship between mother and child was the child who, as in the above-mentioned films, was both a stereotype of the tragic mulatta figures and a warning that worked to strike fear in white audiences. It was to alert them to the enemy within, and for black audiences the warning was clear, they should abandon ideas of rebellion (or infiltration). For both audiences, the message behind these films was a strong admonishment to refrain from miscegenation. At the same time, the Fannie Hurst novel and John Stahl's film adaptation, were, at least from the point of view of Hurst, "anti-racist" in spirit and though its execution may have been a point of serious critique for some, it was one of the first mainstream films that approached the race issue from points other than comic.⁸⁰

Similarly, *Imitation of Life* in the 30s and *Pinky* in the 40s captured the hopes and fears of the white imagination as it considered the inclusion of African Americans into the American landscape. The black mothers in these films were portrayed as longsuffering and aware of and content with their subordinate roles in the lives of their white counterparts. So much so, that they attempted to inculcate this worldview into their rebellious light-skinned daughters who have infiltrated white America. These stories, having been written by and for white audiences of the period, reveal much more about the sub/conscious racial panic that many white Americans were experiencing directly after WWI as the country was entering into the Depression. So, even while African Americans were chanting the slogan "Double V", in Hollywood, subordinate images of blacks were a constant reminder that harkened viewers back to the "good ol' days".⁸¹ Though

⁸⁰ Itzkovitz, *Life*, xxix-xxxii.

actresses like Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters and Butterfly McQueen were criticized for taking these roles, they achieved stardom by playing maids and mammies in Hollywood films. For at least one critic, their greatest achievement was not their on-screen appearance, it was their shrewdness as actresses in an all white movie industry. African American film historian, Donald Bogle characterized the nature of this development succinctly... The history of blacks in American films is one in which actors," he posited,

Have elevated kitsch or trash and brought to it arty qualities if not pure art itself. Indeed, the thesis of my book is that all black actors-from Stepin Fetchit to Rex Ingram to Lena Horne to Sidney Poitier and Jim Brown-have played stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype. (Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* [New York: Continuum, 1989], XX)

Louise Beavers, in the thirties portraying mammies and the long-suffering mother in the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*, embodied the spirit of the liberal white psyche of the Depression and New Deal era. Beavers portrayed a hardworking, self-sacrificing mother, while symbolizing the mythological construct of Mammy, whose loyalty resides with her white family as Delilah's is for Bea and her daughter. Therefore, it is out of this new social consciousness of poverty and desperation that provides an atmosphere just right for a film like *Imitation of Life* to emerge, which focused on the black urban domestic and her particular plight.

Donald Bogle depicted the era as one in which this “new image” spoke to America’s more liberated consciousness. He explained, “*Imitation of Life* was an outgrowth of this new conscious liberal spirit. It prided itself on its portrait of the modern black woman, still a servant but imbued with dignity and a character that were an integral part of the American way of life”.⁸² The film, an adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s best-selling novel, was produced by Universal Studios and directed by John Stahl. It starred African American actresses Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington along with Claudette Colbert, Rochelle Hudson, Ned Sparks, and Warren William. The 1934 classic centered around two widowed mothers, one white, and the other black, each struggling to make a living in order to support their daughters.

Bea, the white mother, hires Delilah as a live-in domestic after some coaxing from Delilah. Both mothers are experiencing financial misfortune; however, because of Bea’s whiteness, those the women come into contact with make assumptions early on in the film about Delilah’s subordinate position in their relationship. From the start, Delilah encourages this viewpoint by not correcting the milkman who comes to collect his fee from Bea but is greeted by Delilah instead. When Bea questions where the week’s supply of milk has come from since she has had no money to pay, Delilah informs her that the milkman simply gave her the supply without asking for a payment. Bea quickly interjects that the milkman has incorrectly assumed she was doing better financially, and because of Delilah’s presence, could afford to hire a maid. Delilah assured her that she had no problem with that and in fact would be more than happy to take care of Bea and her daughter if she would only provide Delilah and her daughter with a place to stay. It

⁸² Bogel, *Toms*, 57.

only takes Bea a few moments to acknowledge that she does need the help and agrees to the arrangement.

After a short while, Bea realizes that Delilah has a talent for cooking delicious pancakes and thus, decides to open a restaurant and later, with the help of a stranger, markets a package mix and hence, establishes a small empire from what belonged to Delilah. To further illustrate Delilah's "selflessness", when Bea and her business manager try to urge Delilah to share in the profits, pious Delilah refuses the offer and relinquishes her rights to the pancake recipe and fortune with only two requests. The first request is that she is allowed to continue to look after Bea and her daughter while saving only what they choose to give her in the way of salary and, second, that she be given a grand funeral when the time comes.

According to Daniel Itzkovitz, this scene in particular was criticized and parodied by Hurst's black contemporaries. Langston Hughes' parody of *Imitation of Life* was called *Limitations of Life* (1938). Itzkovitz described it as being "from a world that Hurst and white reviewers had no idea exists," and "it exposes the earnest blind spots and implausible assumptions about African Americans made by *Imitation of Life*". His description of the satiric scene continues:

Set in a 'luxurious living room,' the stage comes complete with 'electric stove, griddle, pancake turner, [and a] box of pancake flour. However, there is one important change to the box: 'Aunt Jemima's picture is white...' Like Hurst's Delilah, Audette, the play's white servant, refuses to accept reasonable compensation. In fact, she refuses anything having to do with her own comfort, suggesting that a nice funeral is all she needs.

(Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, ed. Daniel Itzkovitz, [Durham: Duke University Press, 1933] pp. xxxii-xxxiii)

The satire continued when Hughes's wealthy black mistress offers Audette "a day off," as a gift, but Audette declined by saying, "Ah wouldn't know what to do with it". Aside from the laughter the parody must have caused, it also clearly demonstrated that black audiences were astute and critical movie viewers.⁸³

However, *Imitation of Life* was not just about complacent servitude. Another story is revealed as the audience is immediately captured by Delilah's little girl, Peola, who looks as white as Bea's own daughter, Jessie. Much of the story between Delilah and Peola is troubling as Delilah attempts to provide materially for her daughter. By the time the girls grow up and are ready to attend college Peola is not interested in what her mother proposes. Delilah offers to pay for Peola's college education at a "colored" school. After rejecting her mother's generosity, Peola decides to move to the city and pass for white instead of attending a college for black students. She moves away and Delilah later discovers that Peola has become an "entertainer" at a gentlemen's club. Delilah pleads with Peola to return home, but to no avail. It is at this point that Peola requests that Delilah never contact her again so that she may live out her life as white. At the film's end, with tears in her eyes, Peola sees her mother one last time as she is being carried off in a funeral procession. Delilah has died of a broken heart.

Similarly, in 1949 *Pinky* was released detailing the accounts of a young African American woman, Pinky, played by white actress, Jeanne Crain, who, like Peola before her, also passes for white while away from home. Unlike Peola, her aunt, played by black actress, Ethel Waters, raises Pinky. Pinky returned home to her family without

⁸³ Ibid.

telling her white boyfriend why she has left. He soon pursues her only to discover her deep dark secret. Both Pinky and Peola are archetypal caricatures of the tragic mulatto. The tragedy is one of a young woman coming of age forced with the oppressive reality of her birth, yet always aware of her ability to become something other. Like images of Mammy, the tragic mulatto is an image frequently depicted in film, television, and literature. Just as the insatiable yearning the light-skinned daughters have for a life that is unattainable, the mothers and mother figures for these young women were equally destined to lead heartbreaking lives.

However, characters like Peola and Pinky meant more than just reproductions of ambiguously coded bodies, they also personify what Alain Locke described as the New Negroes at the turn of the twentieth century, who was unlike the Old Negro, who seemingly was more devoted to whites than those of their own race. This is particularly the case with Peola, whom Fredi Washington portrayed as rebellious and unwilling to be second best as she interpreted her mother's role in the family. Bogle described her rebellion by asserting, "...Miss Washington made Peola a password for non-passive resistance. She seemed to be crying out that she simply wanted the same things in life other people enjoyed...Peola was the New Negro demanding a real New Deal".⁸⁴

Though Bogle's reading of Peola may be optimistic for some, Fredi Washington did bring to the character, humanness, which contrary to Louise Beaver's, Delilah, was saintly. Instead, it is Washington's Peola who brought to life the frustration and suffering of black people living in Jim Crow America. *Imitation of Life* was a hit film for Universal, so much so that it was remade in the 1950s. Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington would garner respect for their roles, and Beavers would go on to star in other

⁸⁴ Bogle, *Toms*, 60.

productions, but Washington would never find her place in a Hollywood that did not know how to cast a black woman too light to play opposite black men and too black to play opposite white men.

To his credit, John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* did offer the public a more complicated look at black women's lives in general. Prior to its release, black actresses in mainstream films were always maids that were one-dimensional. Stahl's *Imitation of Life* provided Louise Beavers with an opportunity to portray, what for some, was a more complex black female role. According to Itzkovitz, the response from the public was just as dynamic as the film itself. Although there were some black audiences that appreciated the film's depiction of black characters, there were just as many who were unsettled by the characterization. Itzkovitz described the reaction as such, "many African Americans expressed pride in the film's depiction of a dignified and religious black woman who diligently saves for her child's education," but, "Not everyone agreed. Black audiences became increasingly uncomfortable with the novel and film's well-intentioned but crude and simplistic depictions of black characters".⁸⁵

Writer, Sterling Brown, was so disturbed by the novel and film; he publicly accosted another fellow writer, Zora Neal Hurston, because of her friendship and public support of Fannie Hurst's work. Hurston and Hurst were dear friends and Hurst, who had obtained much success as a writer, patronized Hurston's endeavors, though to what extent is not clear.⁸⁶ However, Brown did not stop there. He also wrote a scathing editorial in the magazine, *Opportunity*, calling the characters, "false and degrading," and "to see in *Imitation of Life* the old stereotype of the contented Mammy; and the tragic mulatto; and

⁸⁵ Itzkovitz, *Life*, xxxii.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the ancient ideas about the mixture of the races. Delilah is straight out of southern fiction”.⁸⁷

According to Itzkovitz, Hurst was not too pleased with Brown’s assessment of her work and called his attitude “ungrateful” and “unintelligent;” apparently her indignation was grounded in her support from her black friends.⁸⁸ Finally, as it pertained to motherhood, Itzkovitz insightfully points out that one of the works of the films and novel was to draw attention to the “impossible relationship between motherhood and success in the marketplace,” while he also underscores the fact the Hurst and her literature have been overlooked in contemporary literary studies, the films about these independent women and single-mothers have gone on to become classics in popular culture. The novel and films “together,” Itzkovitz described, “provide a lens through which readers of the early twenty-first century can explore the evolution of the most fundamental American cultural issues of the twentieth”.⁸⁹

Even still, *Imitation of Life* also teaches the viewer several things about women’s relationship to money. While Bea is underemployed she is still able to maintain a home in a quiet community for little Jessie, and work as a saleswoman (having taken over her late husband’s sales route). On the other hand, Delilah and Peola are essentially homeless. However, Delilah too is a saleswoman; she sells an image that even white Northerners will recognize, Mammy. If there was a subversive reading of Delilah, it unfolds as viewers watch Delilah talk her way into Bea’s home, next, positions herself in

⁸⁷ Sterling A. Brown, “Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake in *Opportunity*”: *Journal of Negro Life* 12 no. 3 (March 1935): 87-88.

⁸⁸ Itzkovitch, *Life*, xxxii.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxix-xl.

the kitchen during the first encounter (already cooking no less), and lastly, ordering Bea's chaotic morning in a matter of minutes, and securing a place for her child to live. Delilah had already outsold Bea before Bea had left the house for work!

Whether done intentionally by Stahl or not, the stark disparities in the reality of New Deal poverty also operating under the guise of commodified motherhood was aptly captured in the "working roles" of the mothers. While Bea is reduced to meager earnings, Delilah and Peola are destitute. The theme of black feminized poverty would be carried even further by African American writers later in that same decade. While Stahl's *Imitation of Life* glosses over homelessness and romanticized underemployment and unemployment for women, an African American writer by the name of Ann Petry would tell the story of urban poverty in such a way that she would be remembered as one of the top selling female authors of the 20th century.⁹⁰

Ann Petry's *The Street*

Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs-religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history... (Pauline E. Hopkins, *Contending*

⁹⁰ Ann K. Perry, "Manliness, Goodness, and God: Poverty, Gender, and Social Reform in English-Speaking Montreal, 1890-1929" (master's thesis, Queen's University, n.d.), pp. 13-14.

Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South [New York: Oxford University Press], 1988)

Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*, published in 1933, caused quite the commotion in the literary community. The buzz surrounding her work may not have been quite so remarkable had it not been one of the first books by a Jewish author, which dealt with race relations, black motherhood, single mothers, and women negotiating male-dominated spaces in the workplace within the sentimental genre.⁹¹ It is not surprising that black audiences would respond to the novel or the 1934 film version as strongly as they did because of these reasons. Another reason for their varied reactions may also have had to do with the already tenuous economic challenges in the country due to the stock market crash and the Depression. Americans of all hues had put aside the frivolities of the "roaring twenties" and the over-indulgence of the cultural renaissance and began to sink into the reality of unemployment and competition in the workforce. Thus, when Hurst's *Imitation of Life* came out, it reflected, in many ways, new conversations Americans were having about race, gender roles, and family life, namely, provision and who would get it first. Audiences were ready for literature that reflected those turbulent times and the success of *Imitation of Life*, despite its employment of controversial issues, was proof of that.

Similarly, black writers brought their own perspective to the discussion and between the thirties and forties; writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry were also deconstructing race, gender and class dynamics within the communities of African Americans. The 1920s "New

⁹¹ According to Hurst's memoirs, her family was actually anti-Semitic and she was embarrassed at the public mention of her ethnic heritage.

Negro” that Alain Locke wrote about, represented for many black people in urban areas, the start of a new era. The newly educated and young war veterans of the twenties were proud examples of what was to come for blacks in America. In like manner, African American writers of the thirties and forties were also part of this new consciousness. Though during the Harlem Renaissance, some black women writers obtained notoriety, like Nella Larsen, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Angelina Weld Grimke, some black male writers, chiefly Richard Wright, would often criticize Hurston’s work because it did not reflect the current move in black literature.

On the other hand, from the thirties to the fifties a different kind of literary revival took place, which reflected these changing times and unlike the Harlem Renaissance before, referred to as the Chicago Renaissance (1935-1953), it spoke in tandem with the sociological community that focused on black family life. According to Hazel Arnett Ervin, what “identifies” the Chicago Renaissance writer was his/her “deterministic outlook for urban America,” for many writers considered part of this movement, they not only were not living in Chicago; their novels were not set in Chicago. Richard Wright was a leading contributor to this burgeoning movement, and writers like, Ann Petry, along with Chester Himes, and William Attaway were all considered to have been heavily influenced by his writing style.⁹² It is not a coincidence that the Chicago Renaissance was described as taking place at the same time that black sociologist like, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, and E. Franklin Frazier of the famed Chicago School of Sociology made major contributions to the study of urbanization on black life. Ervin wrote that after the excitement of the Harlem Renaissance had dwindled, Chicago

⁹² Hazel Arnett Ervin, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry* (Conneticut: Praeger, 2005) xvi.

became the next site that almost overnight had become inundated with recent black immigrants that had moved from the south.⁹³ He recounted writer, Robert Bone's, assessment of the tone and atmosphere of this new movement. From his estimation it took on a more political aspect than its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance:

...The flowering of Negro Letters that took place in Chicago from approximately 1935 to 1950...[Furthermore, it] was in all respects comparable to the more familiar Harlem Renaissance. [A]s the writers of the Chicago school launched their careers[,] they wrote repeatedly of the Great Migration, and of the transformation it wrought in the black community. They wrote of the pathology that was too often the price of adjustment to the urban scene....Their basic outlook, reflecting the recent history of the black community, was integrationist. This orientation was reinforced by their contacts with the Chicago School of Sociology, which offered them a sophisticated theory of urbanization.⁹⁴

The history of what literary scholars refer to as the Chicago Renaissance is a long one, enmeshed within it, a seemingly odd cross mixture of scientists, writers, elites, and leftists. However, Richard Wright, whose famous novel, *Native Son*, captured within it the spirit of this new move towards topics like urbanization, pathology, poverty, and violence. When Petry released *The Street*, reviewers immediately likened her work to Wright's and described her as "Wright's protégé".⁹⁵ She denied any connection; accept to later admit that she had read the works of all associated with the Chicago School and

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ervin, review, xvii.

“naturalistic writers”.⁹⁶ It was possible that her reluctance to admit any overt influence may explain why her name is not readily mentioned in lists associated with the school.

Ann Petry was not only successful as a writer, but her work was also celebrated for its “vivid plots and intricate characterizations,” and with the publishing of her first novel, *The Street* in 1946, she became the first African American female author to give attention to the lives of poor black women living in the ghetto. Not only this, but from its popularity, Petry then became the first black woman author to sell over two million copies. While alive, not even Zora Neale Hurston experienced such celebrity. *The Street* had also had a capricious time in the marketplace. Though it was immensely popular in the forties, it had lost steam by the emergence of the fifties and was difficult to find on a bookshelf in the sixties and seventies. Deborah McDowell’s editions of black women’s literature in the eighties captured it from almost being overlooked permanently in literary studies.⁹⁷ To that end, the novel had also lost favor in black literary circles. James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison condemned the protest novel, of which, *The Street* was certainly considered. In the popular essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), Baldwin asserted, “the failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which can not be transcended”.⁹⁸ Ellison similarly argued in “The World and The Jug” (1972), “...protest is not the source of inadequacy characteristic of

⁹⁶ Ervin, review, xix.

⁹⁷ Barbara Christian, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, (Conneticut: Praeger, 2005); Barabara Smith, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, (Conneticut: Praeger, 2005).

⁹⁸ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in *Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin: a Casebook*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 52-57.

most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft: bad writing. The desire to have protest performs the difficult task of art..." according to Ellison.⁹⁹

These were very strong criticisms of a work that, at the time of its publishing, was groundbreaking for its daring to address the theme of poverty from the perspective of black motherhood. *The Street* is about Lutie Johnson, a young mother raising her adolescent son, Bub, in the slums of New York. Lutie is a domestic, who dreams of becoming a singer, but also struggles to make ends meet while on her own. Set in the late forties, Lutie lives in Harlem as a tenant with her son. Lutie, who is so desperate to leave the problems of her father's home, rents an apartment in Harlem in order to give her son a room of his own and a better life. However, fate has conspired against Lutie, and she and Bub become pawns and victims of racist and sexist circumstances that alter their livelihood. The book ends with Lutie committing a heinous crime in self-defense and afterwards fleeing to escape the law, while Bub waits for her to visit him while he is in jail at no fault of his own.

Lutie's story is one of the failed American Dream. Petry reminds the reader throughout the book that all of the bad choices we see Lutie make is essentially because she is chasing after what her white employer's refer to as, "richest damn country in the world," and "after a year of listening to their talk, she absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough".¹⁰⁰ Her dream was simple, money for her and Bub would provide them with a home in a safe environment and give Lutie the freedom to be at home to watch Bub.

⁹⁹ Ralph Ellison, "The World in the Jug" in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964).

¹⁰⁰ Petry, *The Street*, 43.

Although Petry has given the reader enough clues to know that the dream Lutie is chasing is doomed, the reader follows along knowing the inevitable will eventually happen.

She didn't have any illusions about 116th street as a place to live, but at the moment it represented a small victory –one of a series which were the result of her careful planning. First, the white-collar job, then an apartment of her own where she and Bub would be by themselves away from Pop's boisterous friends, away from Lil with her dyed hair and strident voice, away from the riff-raff roomers who made it possible for Pop to pay his rent. Even after living on 116th for two weeks, the very fact of being there was still a small victory.¹⁰¹

Unkown to Lutie is that her "victory" will never be fully achieved because Petry never lets the readers forget about the external difficulties Lutie must face everyday. After Lutie can no longer work as a domestic, she eventually finds herself in a pink-collar position as a low ranking civil servant. Although she is offered a singing job at a local club, the white owner, Junto, also intends to not pay her, so that she remains poor and reliant upon him so that he can have her sexually.

Petry describes Lutie as being physically attractive, so much so that the other characters she encounters objectify her sexually and view her as a commodity for their own gain. After Lutie is almost raped by the black building superintendent, she struggles up the stairs to her apartment contemplating her role in the tragedy:

She climbed the stairs slowly, holding on to the railing. Once she stopped and leaned against the wall, filled with a sick loathing of herself,

¹⁰¹ Petry, *The Street*, 56.

wondering if there was something about her that subtly suggested to the Super that she would welcome his love-making, wondering if the same thing had led Mrs. Hedges to believe that she would leap at the opportunity to make money sleeping with white men, remembering the women at the Chandlers' who had looked at her and assumed she wanted their husbands. It took her a long time to reach the top floor.¹⁰²

Scholar, Barbara Smith in her review called "A Familiar Street" accurately surmised that, "the imperceptible thing that is 'wrong' with Lutie is the fact that she has inherited the legacy of slavery that defines black women as sexual chattel".¹⁰³ At the same time, so engrossed is she in her desire to have a career that leads her out of the ghetto that her children are left at home to fend for themselves against predatory neighbors like the Super. However, Petry is not quick to place the responsibility of these failed families on the shoulders of these women. Instead, the fashion of protest literature, which "blatantly and unflinchingly condemns racism and all its ramifications," and as in the case of *The Street*, the ills faced by Lutie can be explained by sexual and economic oppression; which is encompassed within institutional racism.¹⁰⁴ Writer, Sherley Ann Williams, also connects Lutie's condition to the plight of contemporary poor women, when she declares, "Petry's assessment of Lutie's predicament—that her options are determined not by her virtue or lack of it, but by the fact that everyone with whom she comes in contact sees her only in terms of her sexuality—still applies to the average low-

¹⁰² Petry, *The Street*, 240-241.

¹⁰³ Smith, review, 10-11.

¹⁰⁴ Joyce Ann Joyce, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, (Connecticut: Praeger, 2005).

income black woman today”.¹⁰⁵ Along with rape, the threat of physical violence is always apparent within these oppressive structures. After Lutie watched a young woman being beaten on 116th street, Petry reminds the readers of the Poor’s limited mobility and apparently inevitable decline.

Lutie got the same jolting sense of shock and then of rage, because these people, all of them-the girl, the crowd in back of her-showed no horror, no surprise, no dismay. They had expected this. They were used to it. And they had become resigned to it. Yes, she thought, she and Bub had to get out 116th street. It was a bad street. And then she thought of the other streets. It wasn’t just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can. And it wasn’t just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other-jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air. It was any place where the women had to work to support the families because the men couldn’t get jobs and the men got bored and pulled out and the kids were left without proper homes because there was nobody around to put a heart into it. Yes. It was any place where people were so damned poor they didn’t have time to do anything but work...It all added up to the same thing, she decided- white people. She

¹⁰⁵ Shirley Ann Williams, review of *The Street* by Hazel Arnett Ervin, *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, (Conneticut: Praeger, 2005).

hated them. She would always hate them. She forced herself to stop that train of thought. It led nowhere. It was unpleasant.¹⁰⁶

Later, Lutie confesses that even with all of the problems before her, she could get out if she “fought hard enough”.¹⁰⁷ The plight of the urban single mother as Petry saw it was filled with struggle and fight. The downfall is that in all of the fighting these women are losing their children just as Lutie lost Bub. In an interview, Petry described what it was about the people of Harlem, and their situations that “touched” her so much. She explained, “Just go into some of [their] houses. You will see rooms so small, and halls so narrow....Just live in one of those houses for a week....Life will become a dismal, hopeless thing, and you’ll want to write a novel”.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, Petry, herself, had not lived this kind of existence firsthand. In fact, Petry grew up in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. She was trained as a pharmacist, but her family was known for its appreciation of good story-telling, thus ensuring that Petry’s career in medicine would be a brief one. She moved to New York to become a journalist, and after eight years, her short story, “On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon” (1943) was published in the *Crisis*, which marked the beginning of her maturation as a writer. She finally gained critical recognition when she won the Houghton Mifflin fellowship award for her entry of five chapters of *The Street*, which also resulted in the book being published.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Petry, *The Street*, 205-206.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁰⁸ Ervin, review, xix.

¹⁰⁹ Ervin, review, xxii-xxiii.

Summary

Despite the hidden racism depicted in films like *Imitation of Life* and *Pinky*, they brought to the fore a conversation about race and motherhood that had been overlooked in mainstream films prior. Intentionally or not, these films also brought to light issues of class and skin color amongst African Americans. To its credit, Stahl's *Imitation of Life*, was the first major Hollywood production to focus on black motherhood, and provided two black actresses a vehicle of opportunity in film. In literature, audiences were also hungry to read about the plight of poor black mothers as the success of Ann Petry's *The Street* indicated. Admittedly not fully formed, America seemed to be on the verge of becoming fascinated with this allusive type called the black mother. Surely, the images of Mammy did not capture her own sometimes-precarious relationship with her own children and tensions between sexuality and class.

Lastly, the research drew attention to the codification of the deserving and undeserving poor as they were shaped by New Deal politics and the birth control movement. Women's bodies were theoretically and literally on display to be studied openly, and even here, black women found themselves doubly exploited due to race and gender. Some sociological studies lead the public to believe that it was also what black mothers did in the home that explained the failures of these women as mothers. It was there failure, by not having husbands, which lead to the ultimate psychological demise of their children. However, regardless of what New Deal Liberalism intended to do by further ingraining roles of masculine and feminine, we will see how, in the upcoming

chapters, these converging and competing voices and images provided a space for the counter formulation of a black women's studies.

Chapter Four~

The Black Matriarch, Politics and Pop Culture

The Black matriarch incarnate: The bulwark of the Negro family since slavery; the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she who, in the mind of the Black poet, scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create Black diplomats and university professors. It is she who, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, drives the young on into the fire hoses and one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery.

Lorraine Hansberry, "The Origins of Character"

...The tangle of pathology is tightening.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Moynihan Report*

The New Deal reform efforts of the 1930s brought on by the Depression firmly solidified the role of white mothers as good, bad, emasculating, or feminine. This was spurred on by the backlash of (white) women entering into the workforce in large numbers and unwelcomingly competing with men for jobs. For black women however, this chapter will explore first, how by the 1960s, black motherhood discourse would continue to take shape concerning gender roles and family behaviors amongst politicians and public intellectuals.¹¹⁰

The public discourse on motherhood was no longer focused on homogenous perceptions about white and black. The color of the dialogue changed once Assistant

¹¹⁰ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 7.

Secretary of Labor, Daniel P. Moynihan's report "The Tangle of Pathology" was published in 1965. After it was made public, discourse surrounding family, race, and pathology would virtually become synonymous for the White House Administration. The report set off a wave of protest amongst civil rights activists and public intellectuals, debatably, becoming one of the most influential writings to come out of the 1960s.

Secondly, the public discourse in popular culture was similar to that of the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s. Black artists led a Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s that countered negative stereotypes of black men and women in popular culture. More specifically, playwright Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 drama *A Raisin in the Sun* challenged the stereotypes of black motherhood with biting commentaries on racism, classism, and sexism. Based on her own family's real life experience, she depicted the tensions between the races as African Americans began to move into predominately white neighborhoods and the tensions between black women and men wrestling with notions of masculinity and femininity. The perception of black women dominating their households and emasculating their sons was common in political and popular arenas. Summarily, this chapter will also investigate how and why Hansberry's 1959 play operated both literally and metaphorically as a link and counter-narrative to the misogynists and racists public discourses of the 30s and 40s, specifically targeting black family organization, to the same rhetoric used in the political discourse of the 1960s and even 1970s.

Thirdly, the popular discourse in the 1975 novel, *Corregidora*, by Gayl Jones also offered a counter-narrative to the political discourse surrounding black family structure by deconstructing and reinventing the myth of the black matriarch. Jones's matriarchs do not emasculate men, though their relationship to and with men is highly complicated by

sexual exploitation and misogyny. Instead, Jones has readers rethink the role of mother as being a *domestic revolutionary* of sorts by telling and re-telling the history of slavery to her children, so that it always competes with the dominant discourse.

The Myth of the Black Matriarch and the Moynihan Report

Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on inter-generationally via value transmission in families, an elite white male standpoint suggests that Black children lack attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children and that this deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Those African-Americans who remain poor are blamed for their own victimization. Using Black women's performance as mothers to explain Black economic subordination links gender ideology to explanations of class subordination.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 74.

In short, what Hill-Collins is arguing is that as a “controlling image” of black women’s behavior, the image of the matriarch is even more insidious than that of the Mammy. For instance, whereas Ann Petry’s Lutie in *The Street* represented the low-income urban single mother, whose experiences reflected the oppression of institutional racism on her mundane (food, rent, utilities, clothing) concerns; with a Sixties analysis, Lutie was now considered a controlling matriarch who had doomed her family to destitution because of her family’s female-headedness. Now, low-income black women were blamed for the subsequent “failure” of their families. Black women were also blamed, in part, for the problems of the economy. According to this logic they were forced to support the family via welfare because of the unwillingness to “model appropriate gender behavior.” As a result, black men were effeminized, thus further demonstrating that blacks were incapable of assimilating into (white) American culture.¹¹²

More to the point, Barbara Christian, in the well-executed documentary *Ethnic Notions* by the late Marlon Riggs, explained the power of stereotypical images of black people within our culture. Her comments concerning the mythological figure of the Mammy can be easily interchanged with that of the black matriarch. She declared:

In your usual set up, in American society, the person who controls is the male. The mammy (matriarch) is presented as the controller. What we have indicating quote unquote how inferior we are. That men are weak and women are strong, the very opposite of the way it's supposed to be according to the societal norms.

¹¹² Ibid., 75.

So the mammy (matriarch) strikes at two important concepts of gender...She is strong...when a woman is supposed to be fragile (and) dependent. She is a controller of her own people, of the males in her own...society...when the female should be dependent and subordinate. An indication clearly that black people can't make it.

Hence, the attack on black women would soon move pass academic verbiage and theories. By the time of the rise of the Black Power movement, it would exacerbate into a full blown assault, but ironically, had also facilitated a more sympathetic (if not pitying) view of black men.

Black families headed by females were demonized by Harvard social scientist and influential political figure, Daniel P. Moynihan, when he wrote a scathing report on black family structure in 1965 titled, "The Tangle of Pathology." At the time, Moynihan worked as the Assistant Secretary of Labor, and thus, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's effort to rectify what was being suggested as America's most perplexing problem, the Negro. Many of Moynihan's ideas were based on E. Franklin Frazier's earlier work in *The Negro Family in the United States*.

Moynihan's initial point was that, "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure". From here, he goes on to argue that the problem with this structure is that since "it is so out of line with the rest of the American society," black families are suffering in a way that "seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole". Thus, the problem this structure causes the family in general, more specifically,

leads to “a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well”.¹¹³

From the onset, Moynihan constructs an argument that pits black masculinity against femininity, thus, instead of dealing with the national problem of racism, lynching, race riots, and segregated housing, Moynihan turned the “Negro problem” back onto the Negro. Hence, when Moynihan posited that the black family was “destroyed...under slavery;” and thus, “white America broke the will of the Negro people,” not even this statement immediately caused an eyebrow to go up.

He went on to say,

...at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation...A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife.¹¹⁴

Moynihan’s premise was that the tangle of pathology plaguing black families was their supposed preponderance of matriarchal organization. In it, Moynihan throws out statistics that were to prove black family “disorganization”, for example, according to another study referenced by Moynihan, “44 percent of Negro families studied, the wife was dominant, as against 20 percent of White wives”.¹¹⁵ For instance, black male

¹¹³ Daniel P. Moynihan. *The Study of Black Families: The Tangle of Pathology* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

unemployment can be explained by what he argues came about as a result of African American women outnumbering men in college, therefore, these women had taken the professional jobs that should have been available to African American men. Although he does concede that men made gains in obtaining college educations in greater numbers than women, women were to blame for what he perceived as their lagging behind in areas of professional employment. In as much as the educational attainment of women retards the progress of men, Moynihan builds a tenuous argument which primarily asserts that black families fail because black men are not present and/or heading their households. William's account of Negro youth growing up with little knowledge of their fathers, less of their fathers' occupation, still less of family occupational traditions, is in sharp contrast to the experience of the White child. The White family, despite many variants, remains a powerful agency...Children today still learn the patterns of work from their fathers...White children without fathers at least perceive all about them the pattern of men working. Negro children without fathers flounder-and fail.¹¹⁶

To this end, this research does not attempt to argue that the presence of a father was not then and is not now very important to the development of a child. Instead, this research hopes to illuminate Moynihan's sexist bias, which then renders any conclusions based on his research difficult to take seriously. Such is the case when Moynihan states, "...the IQs of children with fathers in the home are always higher than those who have no father in the home...broken homes may also account for some of the differences between Negro and White intelligence scores".¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

In sum, African American children essentially have almost no hope of higher intelligence or success without a solid patriarch (with the help of the military) to disentangle the web of pathology brought on by domineering women.

Moynihan provided no real solution for any of the ills he reported on and as his argument went on, he placed the “failure” of black families squarely on the shoulders of the individual (mother). Thus, a report commissioned by the federal government alleviated policy makers, law enforcement and local governments of any material responsibility that aided in raising low employment rates, housing discrimination, poor health care, and failing school systems, in other words, institutional racism would not be addressed. The pathology, as outlined in the report, also came about as a result of black families failing to emulate their white counterparts. In fact, all of the problems Moynihan discussed stem from low-income families’ departure from white middle-class family values.¹¹⁸ Moreover, he asserts,

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society [,] which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A

¹¹⁸ Moynihan also looks to Frazier’s work in the *Black Bourgeoisie* (1962) to further argue the distinctions between low-income and middle-class black values. In it, Frazier argues that black middle class families tend to outperform their white counterparts when it comes to family structure.

subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.¹¹⁹

The “disadvantage” that black people suffered from was that of not being white, or at the very least, not assimilating into the (white) American fabric, more thoroughly.

At the time of Moynihan’s writing, President Kennedy had been assassinated and his predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson was now struggling with keeping a country together that had become divided along the lines of black vs. white and liberal vs. conservative. Johnson was criticized by civil rights activists as moving too slow on matters amounting to black people being recognized as full citizens and threatened by whites who felt the changes to *equalize* the races were occurring too fast. Fortunately, in 1964 and 1965 Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in response to the civil rights movement.¹²⁰ Hence, Moynihan’s report came at a time when (southern and northern) racism was being confronted on a policy level. Initially, the presumed dominance of black women in the family was blamed for societal ills ranging from family dysfunction, undereducated sons, over-achieving daughters, and the overall breakdown of the black family.

Moynihan’s theories were not new; in fact, they were almost thirty years behind Frazier. However, what made Moynihan’s thesis seemingly fresh was that previous scholarship on black family patterns were largely only consumed by other social scientists. In fact, sociologists, Lee Rainwater and William Yancey, argued that

¹¹⁹ Moynihan, *Tangle*, 8.

¹²⁰ The continued violence, which involved everything from the Watts riots to the Birmingham church bombing helped to motivate and shape the resulting events. See Premilla Nadasen’s, *Welfare Warriors* for a great analysis of this.

Moynihan's findings were typical and similar to sociological research being espoused by others in the field at the time. They declared:

To sociologists and psychologists with a professional interest in the situation of the Negro Americans, the report presented little that was new or startling. Rather, it presented in a dramatic and policy-oriented way a well-established, though not universally supported view of the afflictions of Negro Americans. Indeed, the basic paradigm of Negro life that Moynihan's report reflected had been laid down by the great Negro sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, over thirty years before.¹²¹

Hence, critique would not initially come by way of academicians because of an already established acceptance of black pathology within public discourse. Perhaps expectedly, since Moynihan's report was released during the height of the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights community would be the first to respond to his lopsided criticism. Historian, Paula Giddings explained the development of the protest in *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* like this:

Leaders, such as George Wiley, founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, criticized the emphasis on internal problems of the Black family at a time when racism was particularly virulent. William Ryan, a psychologist...suggested that the race factor may have induced Moynihan

¹²¹ Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), 7.

to exaggerate the increase in female single-headed households (which was 5 percent from 1940 to 1960) and its causes.¹²²

It would take the progressive sociological community a little longer to respond. Their untimely response would not be due to their lack of interest; instead, the issues addressed by Moynihan, by this time, were considered hackneyed. According to James E. Blackwell and Morris Janowitz, Rainwater and Lee's analysis would soon fall by the wayside, and "Moynihan's works came to be interpreted as a caricature of, and an attack on, the black family, and many sociologists eventually joined in the criticism".¹²³

For public intellectuals like sociologist, Hylan G. Lewis responding to Moynihan's critique, their rebuttals would be thorough, but they would not erase public memory. Hylan G. Lewis was asked to present a "non-Moynihanian" paper in response to the infamous report; he along with the assistance of Elizabeth Herzog prepared the "Agenda Paper No. V: The Family: Resources For Change—Planning Session for the White House Conference 'To Fulfill These Rights,' November 16-18, 1965." On commission from the White House, Lewis, along with others, developed a thorough critique of Moynihan's Report, challenging his findings almost point by point. Some of the issues specific to family attitudes and behavior in the Moynihan Report argued, "A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife".¹²⁴ It further declared,

¹²² Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 326.

¹²³ James Blackwell and Morris Janowitz. *Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 210.

¹²⁴ Moynihan, *Tangle*, 30.

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and in a consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.¹²⁵

Hylan G. Lewis' report countered with,

The family and family behavior among Negroes shows great range and variability; especially overlooked and underrated is the diversity among low-income Negro families. When these are overlooked for any reason, there is danger that the depreciated and probably more dramatic and threatening, characteristics of a small segment of the population may be imputed to an entire population. Family and personal strengths, resiliencies and demonstrated capacity for change found at all levels are a prime resource to be taken into account in planning programs aimed at strengthening family life among Negroes.¹²⁶

Lewis went on to express that the goal of the paper was to, "focus attention on the policy and program implications of current family facts and issues," particular to Negro Americans. The objective for obtaining those facts and surmising the issues as determined by Lewis' research surrounding the family was clear, "the functions of the family are discussed chiefly in terms for what it does for children". The Lewis report also pointed out the apparent flaw in the Moynihan report and that was "the problem of

¹²⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹²⁶ Hylan Lewis. Agenda Paper No.V: The Family: Resources for Change –Planning Session fro the White House Conference "To Fulfill These Rights" November 16-18, 1965, 315.

analyzing data by color rather than by income level” tended to guide the research to an already determined conclusion. Lewis, unlike Moynihan, took into account institutional racism that resulted in black Americans receiving lower wages, poorer health-care, and lower rates of home ownership.¹²⁷

Critics of Moynihan primarily focused their rebuttals on the socio-economic and the report’s problematic racial implications. With only a few exceptions, in the early debates surrounding Moynihan’s Report, the discussion focused predominately on the black family in general or black men and the effects of the economy on their ability to sustain a household. Most mention black women as tangential and almost always in reference to sexual promiscuity even when the goal is to disprove negative stereotypes. Unfortunately, even scholarship that presumably countered the attack of Moynihan’s report did little in the way of fully fleshing out black women’s identities or challenging negative stereotypes about women.

For example, William Ryan’s 1971 book titled, *Blaming the Victim* fell prey to this trap. In the chapter titled, “Mammy Observed: Fixing the Negro Problem,” Ryan further challenged Moynihan’s conclusions, but he says nothing about the effects of the report on black women or black femininity. Nor does he fully interrogate Moynihan’s concept of matriarchy past a short mention of matriarchal patterns being prevalent in some white ethnic groups as well. However, in the subsequent chapter titled, “The Prevalence of Bastards: Illegitimate Views of Illegitimacy,” Ryan has a full discussion of low-income black girl’s sexuality comparing it to that of their white counterparts, while explaining the problems with research that center binary assessments.¹²⁸ Thus, African

¹²⁷ Lewis, *Agenda*, 317-320.

American women were, for the most, ignored in critiques and deeper analyses of the Moynihan report. This proved that once again, examinations of gender, even in matters concerning the family, were male-centered.¹²⁹

Finally, the real issue with Moynihan's analysis was not that black women hold a certain amount of power in their homes, the problem in his examination lies in his inability to see past his own prejudices. The problem rests in the fact that the traditional white patriarchal family structure for Moynihan was the point of reference. Moynihan has set up several binaries (white/black, male/female, masculine/feminine, and middleclass/poor, educated/undereducated, hard-work/lazy) all equaling white normalcy and black degeneracy.

For social scientists and politicians alike, "blaming the victim" had now become the order of the day. Sociologists, both black and white, still responding to the aftermath of the 1965 Moynihan report, were now expanding their critiques of patriarchy to include the causes of poverty. Accordingly, William Ryan thoughtfully examined the factors that prohibit a successful transition from disadvantaged to advantage:

Consider some victims. One is the miseducated child in the slum school. He is blamed for his own miseducation. He is said to contain within himself the causes of his inability to read and write well. The shorthand phrase is "cultural deprivation," which, to those in the know, conveys what they allege to be inside information: that the poor child carries a scanty pack of intellectual baggage as he enters school. He doesn't know

¹²⁸ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) pp. 63-116.

¹²⁹ Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Routledge: New York, 2005), 144-145.

about books and magazines and newspapers, they say. (No books in the home: the mother fails to subscribe to Reader's Digest.) They say that if he talks at all-an unlikely event since slum parents don't talk to their children- he certainly doesn't talk correctly. (Lower-class dialect spoken here, or even-God forbid!-Southern Negro...) If you can manage to get him to sit in a chair, they say, he squirms and looks out the window. (Impulsive-ridden, these kids, motoric rather than verbal.) In a word he is 'disadvantaged' and 'socially deprived,' they say, and this, of course, accounts for his failure (*his* failure, they say) to learn much in school.

Ryan continued with,

...No one remembers to ask the questions about the collapsing buildings and torn textbooks; the frightened, insensitive teachers; the six additional desks in the room; the blustering, frightened principals; relentless segregation; the callous administrator; the irrelevant curriculum; the bigoted or cowardly members of the school board; the insulting history book; the stingy taxpayers; the fairy-tale readers; or the self-serving faculty of the local teachers' college. We are encouraged to confine our attention to the child and to dwell on all his alleged defects. Cultural deprivation becomes an omnibus explanation for the educational disaster area known as the inner-city school. That is *Blaming the Victim*.¹³⁰

"Blaming the victim", according to Ryan, is a fundamental "process" of which most Americans are subject to fall into and can be "applied" to nearly every "American problem". Though some would argue the concept dated, "blaming the victim" captured

¹³⁰ Ryan, *Victim*, 4-5.

the social and political climate of the late sixties.¹³¹ Moreover, long after Moynihan had left Johnson's Administration, the fallout from his infamous report continued to reverberate.

A Raisin in the Sun

It was as if playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, had foreseen all of this. Just as Moynihan's name was becoming synonymous with the black family within political and sociological circles, the way black families would come to be presented in film and television would continue to reflect the debates taking place in the White House and the academy (just as Ann Petry's *The Street* had for the Chicago/Wright School). Similarly, the 1950s and 1960s marked a turning point in American mainstream entertainment. In 1959, African American playwright and screenwriter, Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway and become an American classic.

Init, Hansberry invited new considerations specific to an urban community in black women's literature like Pan-Africanism, abortion, masculinity, the black intellectual, generational conflict, and the "ghetto-hero" in Walter Lee (444). More to the point, as a black woman playwright and screenwriter, Hansberry crafted a text that interrogated gender roles, femininity, masculinity and patriarchy. Moreover, in the play,

¹³¹ *Blaming the Victim* was definitely a product of its time as it was before the often overlooked and forgotten Poor People's Campaign and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., who was one of the organizers of the campaign. Blacks and liberal Whites were seeking to "re-establish" America as a country that would not ignore its problems of race and poverty, as they ushered in a historical moment of self-reflexivity and consciousness raising. This was prevalent throughout American culture and through the influx of new and progressive programs, would eventually move into academe. By the eighties, when Ronald Reagan is elected president, Americans would hear a similar rhetoric, as Reagonomics would come into effect, but it would lead to even greater negative consequences for black Americans

the matriarch must be liberated from perfunctory examinations, while Hansberry offers up another way to analyze the Matriarchal stereotype that endows her with agency instead of dreaded domination.

A Raisin in the Sun (1959) ushered theatergoers into the sixties and would foreshadow the debates surrounding the matriarch and black masculinity. The play was later adapted into a feature length drama of the same name in 1961 and directed by Daniel Petrie for Columbia Pictures. Since the making of *Imitation of Life* in 1939, racist discourse in film and television had become even more entrenched in American popular culture. By the sixties, the demoralizing impact of racism existed in politics and Hollywood as “systemized hierarchization...anchored in material structures and embedded in historical configurations of power”.¹³² The stereotypes of happy darkies on the plantation, big black mammies, and little pickaninnies informed the culture that it was okay to think of black people in this light. So much so that issues of race covered in film and television would be distinguished by four themes:

Stories of the tragic mulatto (*Showboat*, 1951, *Raintree County*, 1959); representations of the exotic, quaint, fake world of blackness (*Carmen Jones*, *St. Louis Blues*, *Porgy and Bess*); accounts of black-white male (and female) bonding (*Defiant Ones*, *Edge of the City*, *Member of the Wedding*); and tales of integration and its problems.¹³³

¹³² Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 19.

¹³³ Norman K. Denzin, *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (California: Sage, 2002), 27.

All of which represented examples of the institutionalized racism that permeated American life. It would also be the latter of these themes that Hansberry would capture as she told the tale of the Younger family.

There have been several adaptations of *A Raisin in the Sun*. From the original play, came a book, screenplay, and film. Hence, there have been numerous people with varying visions and insights attached to producing Hansberry's play, so it is important for this writer to distinguish which production will be emphasized. This research focuses on the 1959 Broadway production of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry was also the screenwriter of the 1961 hit, which was nominated for seven awards and winning two. The play opened on Broadway in 1959 and John Gassner's review touted it as "authoritative" and "reflecting current reality" (230). From the film, Ruby Dee won for best supporting actress by the National Board of Review (1961) and Daniel Petrie won best director from the Directors Guild of America (1961).

On Broadway, the Younger family included Walter Lee, played by Sidney Poitier, as the eldest child and only son to the late patriarch and Lena, played by Claudia McNeil. Ruby Dee is Ruth, Walter Lee's wife, and Diana Sands plays Beneatha, Lena's youngest child. The family lives in a tiny Chicago tenement and receives 10,000 dollars from the late patriarch's insurance policy. Walter Lee has hopes of going into business with some unscrupulous friends and opening up a liquor store, while Beneatha wants to use the money to pay for medical school, and Ruth and Lena share a dream of owning a home. The plot details Walter Lee's frustration with his job as a chauffeur to a wealthy white businessman and constantly harasses Lena about giving him the insurance money. Aside from Walter Lee and Ruby's young son, Walter Lee is the only man in a tiny apartment

filled with women. The story develops as Walter Lee slowly drifts away from the family and misses work in order to drink at the neighborhood bar.

As Walter Lee slips into alcoholism, Lena, the matriarch, decides to purchase a home in an all white neighborhood and in order to rescue her son from his inevitable decline she goes to the bar, hands over the account book and grants him control over what should be done with the remaining funds. Naively, Walter Lee loses the money to a crooked business partner and is once again thrown into a fit of depression. The family has lost all of its money; therefore Beneatha will be unable to attend medical school thus causing friction between her and Walter Lee. The one saving grace for the family is the house Ruby dreamed of and Lena bought. However, once they lose the money, it is uncertain as to whether or not the family will be able to afford to remain in the home. In the final scenes, a spokesman from the segregated neighborhood pays the Younger family a visit and offers to pay them not to move into the neighborhood. This is the opportunity Walter Lee has been looking for, but to sell his home would be the ultimate act of cowardice. In the end, Walter Lee declines the money and moves his family into their new home awaiting an uncertain future.

Both the play and film, were groundbreaking. Hansberry who was politically and socially conscious, created characters that reflected oppressed people's anguish, humiliation, and aggravation. It was the first hit for a black woman on Broadway and allowed for actors Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee to break out of the safe and sexless roles they were finding in Hollywood and step into characters that exhibited their range as actors. Also, the Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun* was historically significant for other reasons as well. Hansberry became the "youngest American, fifth woman, and

first African American to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play of the Year”.¹³⁴

According to Margaret B. Wilkerson, getting the play to Broadway was not a sure thing and:

Starting from a half empty house in New Haven, *A Raisin in the Sun* attracted larger audiences on its out-of-town trials through Chicago and other cities until a last minute rush for tickets in Philadelphia earned it a Broadway house. It had taken a year to raise the \$100,000 needed for the show -the "smart money" would not take a risk on a serious play about a Black family. The tenuousness of its production life ended, however, with its New York opening. The show ran on Broadway for nineteen months and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award against such plays as Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Archibald MacLeish's *I.B.*, and Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*.¹³⁵

Not so unexpectedly, scenes were deleted from the original script due to time constraints for the production and because some scenes were thought to be too controversial and racially sensitive for the 1959 audience. Although Mama and Walter Lee's "debate over materialism and integrity" compel the play, one of the scenes that did not make it to the stage was an exchange between Walter Lee and his son, Travis. The exchange does not reflect a particular radicalism on Walter Lee's part, but it does provide the viewer with

¹³⁴ Steven Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment and Complexity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 10.

¹³⁵ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, introduction to *Lorraine Hansberry* by Margaret B. Wilkerson (New York: The New Press, 1995).

another reading of power, money and gender relations as seen through the eyes of Walter Lee. He and Travis are alone talking and Walter Lee shares with him:

You wouldn't understand yet, son, but your daddy's gonna make a transaction . . . a business transaction that's going to change our lives . . . That's how come one day when you 'bout seventeen years old I'll come home and I'll be pretty tired, you know what I mean, after a day of conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do . . . 'cause an executive's life is hell, man- . . . And I'll pull the car up on the driveway . . . just a plain black Chrysler, I think, with white walls -no -black tires. More elegant. Rich people don't have to be flashy . . . though I'll have to get something a little sportier for Ruth -maybe a Cadillac convertible to do her shopping in . . . And I'll come up the steps to the house and the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and hell say "Good evening, Mr. Younger." And I'll say, "Hello, Jefferson, how are you this evening?" And I'll go inside and Ruth will come downstairs and meet me at the door and we'll kiss each other and she'll take my arm and well go up to your room to see you sitting on the floor with the catalogues of all the great schools in America around you . . . All the great schools in the World! And -and I'll say, all right son -it's your seventeenth birthday, what is it you've decided? Just tell me where you want to go to school and you'll go. Just tell me, what it is you want to be-and you'll be it . . . Whatever you want to be -Yessir! You just name it, son . . . and I hand you the world!

However, this scene is about much more than materialism, as Wilkerson pointed out, this passage reveals the “image is typical Americana -the independent male who controls the world and around whom the universe revolves. Wives, secretary, gardener, Cadillac, sports car -all are complements to his material universe. His manhood is at stake, he believes, and the women around him with their traditional values are holding him back”.¹³⁶ Hansberry, in a most thoughtful way, provides us with a film that tackles racial, class, and gendered identities coming together in a small three-bedroom tenement. Although the family members are employed or in school, viewers understand that without the financial relief the policy will provide, the Younger’s have very few options. With the exception of Beneatha, who has the option of marrying “well”, the Younger family’s financial experience represented those of the majority of urban, low-income and working-class communities at that time.

Furthermore, Hansberry’s production emphasized the family’s strong work ethic, something that is most often ascribed to the middle-class. As Ruth and Mama Younger think over what could be done with 10,000 dollars, Mama gives Ruth a lesson in priorities as she remembers her late husband:

RUTH: Well-what are you going to do with it then?

MAMA: I ain’t rightly decided. Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin’ -and ain’t nothing going to touch that part of it. Nothing. Been thinking that we maybe could meet the notes on a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime, if we use part of the insurance for a down payment and everybody kind of pitch in. I could maybe take on a little day work again, few days a week-

¹³⁶ Ibid., 447.

RUTH: Well, Lord knows, we've put enough rent into this here rattrap to pay for four houses by now...

MAMA: "Rattrap"-yes, that's all it is. I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year. We was going to set away, little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house. Looks right dumpy today. But the Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back-And didn't non of it happen.

RUTH: Yes, life can be a barrel of disappointments, sometimes.

Little by little, we see Hansberry reveal both the eventual longing in Mama and Big Walter for the dreams that fell to the wayside, but they had pride and hope for what the next generation might accomplish:

MAMA: Honey, Big Walter would come in here some nights back then and slump down on that couch there and just look at the rug and look at me and look at the rug and then back at me-and I'd know he was down then...really down...I guess that's how come that man finally worked his-self to death like he done. Like he was fighting his own war with this here world that took his baby from him...Crazy 'bout his children! God knows there was plenty wrong with Walter Younger-hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women-plenty wrong with him. But he sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something-be something. That's where Brother gets all his notions, I reckon. Big Walter used to say, he'd get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the Black man nothing

but dreams-but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile...” Yes, a fine man-just couldn’t never catch up with his dreams, that’s all.¹³⁷

Hansberry would warn of the crisis of materialism and urbanization long before it was considered fashionable in the Civil Rights Movement. Her concentration on the Northern ghetto instead of the tenet farm in the South as the site for racial tension, under-employment, less than adequate housing, and gender relationships could explain why some black critics did not see the relevance of her work at the time of her writing. In fact, black critic, Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* described *A Raisin in the Sun* as “a glorified soap opera”.¹³⁸

From the previous passages, we see Mama (Lena) and Ruth talking about Mama’s late husband, Big Walter. With her wifely wisdom, Mama understood the institutional racism that plagued Big Walter, affecting their marriage and their quality of life as a family. At this point she has not acknowledged her own drudgery in cleaning other people’s homes or raising a family in a small tenement apartment. Undoubtedly, Hansberry’s centering black masculinity was a reflection of the time period it was created, but her storyline also crafted a beautifully sequenced clash between the sole “man” in the family and his three female counterparts. Walter Lee’s relationship to his wife, sister, and mother is almost always antagonistic. With only a few exceptions, the scenes are all in one location, the small run-down apartment in Chicago. Beneatha, the college student, is the only one in the family who appears to be undaunted by her family’s current circumstance, for she is being courted by two handsome and wealthy

¹³⁷ Hansberry, *Raisin*, 28-29.

¹³⁸ Cruse, *Crisis*, 278.

gentleman who apparently want to marry her. However, she is not fazed by the attention because her goal is to become a doctor.

On the other hand, Walter and Ruth are married, have a young son, Travis, and are expecting another child, all of them living with Lena and Beneatha. We discover early on that Walter is a chauffeur and hates his job. In an argument with Ruth he tells her,

WALTER: See-I'm trying to talk to you 'bout myself-and all you can say is eat them eggs and go to work.

RUTH: Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you everyday, every night, and every morning, and you never say nothing new. So you would rather be Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So-I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace.

WALTER: That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world...Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

RUTH: There *are* colored men who do things.

WALTER: No thanks to the colored woman.

RUTH: Well, being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none.

WALTER: We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds.

As the matriarch, a cursory reading of Mama would suggest that she was simply the embodiment of an urban Mammy, but one need only to consider Hansberry's own words concerning the Matriarch:

The Black matriarch incarnate: The bulwark of the Negro family since slavery; the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she who,

in the mind of the Black poet, scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create Black diplomats and university professors. It is she who, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, drives the young on into the fire hoses and one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery.¹³⁹

Unfortunately, Lena Younger/Mama has typically been critiqued as inactive and compliant, the very characteristics of the negative stereotype of Mammy. This could be attributed to the erasure of a critical scene from the original production where in Mama confronts a meddling neighbor who tries to subtly discourage her from moving into the all-white Clybourne Park neighborhood:

Johnson: Sometimes . . . [Beneatha] act like she ain't got time to pass the time of day with nobody ain't been to college. Oh -I ain't criticizing her none. It's just -you know how some of our young people gets when they get a little education . . . 'Course I can understand how she must be proud and everything -being the only one in the family to make something of herself! I know just being a chauffeur ain't never satisfied Brother none. He shouldn't feel like that, though. Ain't nothing wrong with being a chauffeur.

Mama: There's plenty wrong with it.

Johnson: What?

Mama: Plenty. My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with -not to drive nobody's car for em -or . . . carry they slop jars. And my boy is just like him-

¹³⁹ Hansberry, *Gifted*, 447.

Johnson: Mmmmm mmmm. The Youngers is too much for me! . . . You sure one proud acting

bunch of colored folks. Well -I always thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time -"Education has spoiled many a good plow hand" -

Mama: Is that what old Booker T. said?

Johnson: He sure did.

Mama: Well, it sounds just like him. The fool.

Johnson: Well -he was one of our great men.

Mama: Who said so?

Fortunately, this scene aimed at elucidating Mama's motives was restored in the 1984 addendum of the Samuel French edition of the play.¹⁴⁰

Hansberry's play was altered to better fit the taste of her white audiences in the 1960s. Although, the original version was eventually recovered, without those previously deleted scenes, *A Raisin in the Sun's* subversive qualities are narrowed. Thus, even as black women writers worked to challenge the disparaging and one-dimensional public discourse focused on black motherhood, they were not without resistance. Interestingly enough, resistance would not always come by way of white public intellectuals or even men, for 1970s writer Gayle Jones her attempts to broaden the discourse on black motherhood were not enthusiastically welcomed by some black women intellectuals either.

Corregidora

¹⁴⁰ Wilkerson, *introduction*, 448.

History and fiction have yielded little about those black slave women who were mistress and breeder to their white owners. There are some facts and figures, but they tell us nothing about the women themselves: their motives, their emotions, and the memories they passed on to their children. Gayl Jones' first novel is a gripping portrait of this harsh sexual and psychological genealogy...

Margo Jefferson, *Newsweek*

By 1975, the year Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* was published, the U.S. had just witnessed in Shirley Chisholm, its first black woman ever to run for President. In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization was founded, which was concerned specifically with black women's issues. Two years from this, the Bethune Museum and Archives would open its doors in order to provide an official site to house black women's archival information. Additionally, black feminists would also become more prominent on college campuses as professors, thus they would, in part, be responsible for ushering in alternative ways of examining canonical works in varied disciplines with the use of criticisms that allowed for interrogations of race, gender, class, and sexuality, themes that were traditionally overlooked. They would even go beyond this and establish new epistemologies for learning in the classroom and for the examination of historical and textual criticism.

Yet and still, it would not just be in politics or the academy that black feminist thought would be conveyed, just like in popular culture, there would be a clear distinction in literary studies that would point to some core themes of black feminist thought in the

work of black women novelists.¹⁴¹ In the works of Ann Petry and Lorraine Hansberry, the core elements of black feminists thought that are clearly visible are the resistance of those controlling images that seek to limit the black women protagonists economic (underemployment) and gender (marriage and abortion) mobility. This argument is not exclusive to just these two categories and could just as easily be expanded to include more. For instance, the poetry and fiction of authors like Ann Shockley, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke that deal with lesbian themes and their particular struggles with sexual oppression are other examples illustrating cultural and societal restraints that in many ways limit the female character's familial and sexual mobility. Ironically, even some of those that produced black feminist criticism were culpable of limiting other black women writers that had not followed more typical (black) literary trends; such was the predicament of Jones's work.

It is in keeping with this, that Gayl Jones's first novel, *Corregidora*, must be explored. Jones's place in the literary canon has been the subject of much debate. There are those within the literary community that greatly admire her work, and then there are those who have dismissed Jones because her work seems to reflect, for those that believe, a bias as "black-men-haters or perverse lovers of white men and women," or for being presumed apolitical.¹⁴² Although, *Corregidora* received critical praise from the literary community when it was published in 1975, there have been few scholarly attempts to explore its maternal, sexual, and psychological themes. More specifically, until recently there had not been a compilation of scholarly articles dealing with the literature of Gayl

¹⁴¹ Collins, *Feminist*, 418.

¹⁴² Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*, (New York: Grove Press, 1966) 201-202.

Jones.¹⁴³ Trudier Harris wrote in the foreword of *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones* that Jones's peculiar subject matters and life story might be the reason why so little critical attention has been paid her work:

Jones is an anomaly as well because her imaginative creations do not superficially intersect with the more obvious defining characteristics of African American literature. Rather than portray African American characters in her novels, short fiction, and poetry who are immediately and directly in conflict with the larger white American society, as much as African American literature does, Jones elects a more distant geography for conflict in *Corregidora*. . . Jones is not concerned about fitting into any pre-existing mold of representation of black female character. . . She is out there, somewhere, one of our better known African American writers, and yet she remains, to a large extent, unclaimed.¹⁴⁴

Yet, does any of this fully explain why Jones's work has been overlooked critically? It could not be her background as a scholar, for Jones, unlike many other self-taught writers, earned a Ph.D. from Brown University. Fiona Mills, from the same source further explained it this way,

Another possible reason for the lack of critical attention to Jones' oeuvre might be its tenuous relationship with black feminist's criticism. During the mid-1970s, the publication of *Corregidora*. . . set off a firestorm of controversy among black feminist scholars. The novels' protagonist, Ursa

¹⁴³ Harris, *Pain*, xii; Fiona Mills, *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayle Jones*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p.1.

¹⁴⁴ Harris, *Pain*, x-xiii.

Corregidora...did not fit the image of the strong, black, independent woman that black feminist scholars, such as Barbara Smith, desperately sought in literature at the height of the Black Women's Movement. As a result, they dismissed Jones' work as less important than others more ideologically in tune with black women writers of the time including Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison.¹⁴⁵

Thus, at least in Mills' account, even from within black feminist circles, there was on the one hand, an assumption of a shared ideological position amongst black feminist scholars; while on the other, there was an unspoken but understood guard at the door. However, what was to constitute strong, black, or independent? Was it not enough that Jones had constructed a narrative around three generations of black and multi-racial women who had all survived the "evil" of patriarch *Corregidora*? For the answers, we must go a little deeper. The novel begins in 1947 with Ursa Corregidora, having just suffered a miscarriage and hysterectomy, telling the story of how she and the three generations of women before her came about. Ursa's great-great grandmother had been a slave, owned by a Portuguese seaman who took ownership of a slave plantation in Brazil. As Ursa explained it "He was from over there somewhere in Portugal...a sea captain. That's why the king give him lands, and slaves and things, but he didn't hardly use nothing but the womens".¹⁴⁶

Great-great grandmother had been taken out of the field as a child and brought into the house to be the whore and mistress of Corregidora. She eventually gave birth to a girl child by the patriarch who he then later also takes from the fields, rapes and uses as

¹⁴⁵ Mills, *Pain*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Jones, *Corregidora*, 23.

a prostitute. After the civil war, Ursa's great grandmother remains on the plantation with Corregidora until she runs away and leaves her daughter behind. She returns years later only to discover that her daughter, now eighteen, is pregnant with Corregidora's child and grandchild. Mother and daughter leave and move to Louisiana, Ursa's own mother is then born, grows up, falls in love with a young drifter and later gives birth to Ursa.

Although *Corregidora* is only 185 pages, just as memory is sometimes compacted and disjointed, the novel jumps from Ursa's remembrances to her at-home recovery from surgery. Each of the Corregidora women are urged by the women before her to tell the story of the rapes and exploitation carried out by the Corregidora patriarch. For Ursa to not be able to continue the story for future generations represented the end of her familial line and her ability to inform future generations of the crime; yet, it also represented her freedom from the awesome responsibility of reliving a narrative she herself never experienced. Throughout the novel, the reader is reminded of the role of the mother. She is to continue the generations and tell the story. The significance that resides in mothering is the ability to preserve a legacy (or is it a burden?) *Corregidora* is Jones' first novel and her work has been likened to the black oral tradition of storytelling. The novel was written in first person and just like a story being told orally, the plot unfolds scene by scene. All of the Corregidora women are inextricably chained to their horrific past of sexual abuse and even Ursa, who is essentially freed from the yoke of passing on the story, cannot escape the memories she herself only lived through in other women's re-memories.

Ursa, as her mother's daughter, comes to represent the embodiment of tradition in that she is not her own. Her very presence in the family is to be a conduit for future

generations. For Jones, memory and legacy are those things black mothers are tied to and obligated to continue. As Ursa reflects on this obligation she points out that, "...we're all consequences of something. Stained with another's past as well as your own. Their past in my blood. I'm a blood. *Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs? What he would ask*".¹⁴⁷

Whose are we, seems to be the question Jones asks her readers. As African American women, is not an essential part of mothering remembering for their children the past of slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights so that they not forget, even when all physical evidence is destroyed as in the case of *Corregidora*? Whether or not Ursa is burdened by the responsibility placed on her by her relatives is left unclear, instead we see in Ursa a morphing of burden and desire becoming a new emotion. When her lover asks Ursa what she wants, she answers in the only way she knows how, "What all us *Corregidora* women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations".¹⁴⁸ To be mother for Ursa is all about what she has been "taught" to desire, but not for the purpose of producing typical majority familial structures; instead it is to bring forth life that disrupts any history that does not acknowledge the sexual exploitation and politics that have been inscribed onto black women's bodies throughout the generations.

Summarily, how was it that a powerfully written novel, which explored themes of the maternal, generational rape, sexuality, lesbianism, and (a more contemporary reading of) psychoanalysis get dismissed by some black feminists (for certain some black men also dismissed the novel, but considering the political context, this was to be expected)?¹⁴⁹ If it was as Harris and Mills have posited, one could simply argue that it

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 22.

was written at the wrong (political and ideological) time. In addition, black women and men activists and scholars have, over the course of centuries, conducted a curious relationship with one another. While black men have been quick to discharge those black women viewed as race traitors for airing “dirty laundry,” and black women have fired back, but with much rebuke, most notably Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978). Some black women, initially, seemed more reticent to distance themselves from black men, possibly at their own detriment. Succinctly put, according to Calvin Hernton in “The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers”, there was a “double-standard” when it came to the cultural treatment of black men from women:

After the publication of *Soul on Ice*, black women did not go berserk denouncing Eldridge Cleaver as an unscholarly, overgeneralizing sensationalist, or as a rapist, hater and batterer of black women, all of which were and are true. Yet when Gayl Jones, author of *Eva’s Man* and *Corregidora* ...when these and other writers depict the hateful attitudes and violent treatment of black men towards black women, the men accuse these women of being black-men haters, bull-dykes, and perverse lovers of white men and women.¹⁵⁰

Interestingly, Hernton, in 1965, had actually argued that the most pressing issue at hand was the “sexualization of the race problem” in America.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Mitchell, 159-169.

¹⁵⁰ Hernton, *Sex*, 201.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Significantly, Harris and Mills open the door for new and exciting critiques and re-examinations of early black feminist criticism, and the Black Women's Movement. As paradoxical as it may seem to a contemporary audience and though possibly unconscious, black feminists might have taken more seriously the criticisms aimed at them from black men within the movement than might have been considered previously, resulting in their (hyper)consciousness of what would receive consideration as serious scholarship. While it could just as easily be a case of some within the Black Women's Movement wanting to distance themselves from topics or issues that seemed to be at odds with an established (political) agenda (and those things had little to do with images associated with the maternal, aside from one's right to choose when to experience it). Lastly, it could also be a combination of these issues, or other issues, or the ones already argued by Harris and Mills, suffice it to say, rightly or wrongly, the critical analysis (or lack thereof) of *Corregidora* is an example of the heterogeneity of black women's critique (in the broadest sense) of one of their own.

Summary

Moynihan's Report, at the height of the civil right movement, literally and metaphorically attempted to strip black women of authority within their families. Although patriarchal assumptions were almost always present in discourses on motherhood, the report, unapologetically, opened the door for the public to view, critique, criticize, destabilize, and defame black mothers and their families. Based on the public's ability to do this, it was established that black families, as abnormal entities, can be

politically chastised, disciplined, and manipulated in ways that other families can not. Thus, the works of Hansberry and Jones are particularly useful in understanding how black women conceptualized and claimed ownership of their bodies and history despite negative counter discourses.

Corregidora would be Jones' responses to the competing images and stories of black women's history. It would be the tensions between black and white women under the umbrella of the women's movement, and the almost detrimental assaults by both white and black men within the black arts and the civil rights, and nationalists' movements, that would inspire an even deeper commitment on behalf of black women to tell their own stories with the unadulterated truth. From Hansberry and Jones, to the countless black women writers and artists that would set the stage in scholarship and literature for the post-industrial age of the 80s and 90s. Along with the narratives to explain African American women's experiences, there were several occurrences that distinguished the approaching postindustrial age as a pivotal one in the discourse on black motherhood.

For certain, the sixties were about competing black motherhood discourses. The decade was different from the previous ones because motherhood discourse was from the sixties onward distinctly and completely codified by race. This would become even more evident in the post-industrial era. For black women, there would be a conservative backlash from the Republican Administration of the eighties, which would target single black mothers and in the nineties; as a result, the Welfare Reform Act would be passed. This next moment would not be for the faint at heart, for what I argue is the official end of the civil rights movement as it was known in the sixties and seventies, the effects of

the lack of a democratization of leadership that Ella Baker urged for in the 50s and 60s, would be felt severely once a clear *enemy* could no longer be identified.

Chapter Five~

The Next Generation

The challenges for Black women in the eighties are many and complex. But Black women survived the rigors of slavery to demand the rights of their race and of their sex. They rose above the most demeaning forms of labor and demanded to be called by their last names...They have extended the meaning of womanhood and personified the central issues of race and feminism.

Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*

In the post-industrial era, the major public discourse involving African American motherhood after the Civil Rights Movement was that of the highly publicized image of the *welfare queen*. Similar to the black matriarch, in that she was a problematic figure within the household, only the welfare queen, during the post industrial era, was single, unemployed, lazy, uneducated, and criminal. In fact, by the 1980s, the conservative rhetoric that blamed the victim for their impoverished status, placed even more emphasis on partakers of welfare, and Republican President Ronald Reagan's administration and the media would not paint a sympathetic picture of poor women needing help. Instead, all forms of media would be saturated with images of villainous single (black) mothers and their wayward children sucking America dry. Thus, this chapter will examine the popular image of the welfare queen through the eyes of conservative and liberal public intellectuals.

Secondly, this chapter will investigate the sometimes conflicting public/private discourse between male and female black powerites, specifically as it relates to black female sexuality, gender roles, and abortion. In the early seventies, a woman's right to abort was one of the major political debates with women winning the right with the now famous Roe Vs Wade case. Black men and women, especially those connected to the Black Freedom Movement (aka Civil Rights Movement) were very vocal about the position they felt black people should have on the matter. Many felt abortion was another form of genocide aided by the white man in order to destroy black children. Yet and still others championed the cause. It can not be overstated that African Americans were just as interested in debates concerning abortion as other groups. Thus, the abortion discourse within the African American community provided a platform, if you will, for conversations surrounding the purpose of (black) motherhood and black women's roles in the household.

To that end, this chapter will explore how African American women public intellectuals like Bettye Collier Thomas, Angela Davis, Dorothy Roberts, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and Patricia Hill Collins along with others, addressed issues like gender, motherhood, and family while other black feminists organized politically (without the help or direction of the white feminist movement). Groups like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), Combahee River Collective, Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA) and so on were all part of a growing collective of black women organizing in the U.S during the late 1960s until 1980s.¹⁵² Although this research will not explore these groups in depth, it is imperative

¹⁵² Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminists Organizations, 1968-1980* (North Carolina: Duke Press, 2005).

that their existence be acknowledged in order to understand the post-industrial era America was now facing. Black women not only organized politically, they also came together as intellectuals. Whether as political allies or academic scholars, these women worked in their own way to offset the negative public discourse that surrounded black female sexuality, motherhood, and overall identity.

Next, black films also reflected public discourse on welfare queens and black studs in America during the 1970s. *Claudine* (1974), starring James Earl Jones and Diahann Carroll, set in Harlem, told the story of a single mother struggling to care for her six children. Claudine (Diahann Carroll) is a domestic and falls in love with Roop (James Earl Jones), a garbage man. The film, directed by John Berry, more comedy than drama, depicted the challenges of black people stressed by overbearing social workers who got to determine a woman's "fitfulness" for welfare based on the material goods in her home and the men in her life. *Claudine* is a social commentary on the oppressive institutional racism embedded within the welfare system. A critically acclaimed film, it captured the reality of many poor black single mothers that generally had no recourse against social workers who had the power to cut their checks at whim. The film hoped to imbue the public with sympathy for these women and their children, and it worked for a moment.

In literature, popular discourse by black women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni and others would produce a more complex black maternal figure. Walker's non-fictional account in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) of a trip south with her mother brings together literary and personal criticisms that challenges negative public perceptions of black women's intellect, resourcefulness and

creativity, while complicating binaries of good and bad/positive and negative. Still contested by some scholars, the use of the personal in literature is what helped to shape black feminists criticism in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Within the black feminist literary tradition, personal criticism is a way to critique the political, social, and cultural moments at any given time. Moreover, this research will examine how the use of personal criticism both contextualizes and reflects these moments without falling into the trap of essentialism.

Second Generation Feminists

In the late seventies, historian and scholar, Bettye Collier-Thomas, founded and served from 1977-1989 as the first Executive Director of the Bethune Museum and Archives, a national historic site, in Washington, D.C. It was the “first U.S. institution to focus on documenting and preserving African American women’s history”. The museum itself was named after one of the most politically influential black women of the twentieth century. Mary McLeod Bethune was the founder and namesake of Bethune-Cookman College, the eighth president of the NACW (National Association of Colored Women’s clubs), after the death of its founder, Carter G. Woodson, the father of black history, Bethune sat at the helm of the ASNLH (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History), and worked as an advisor on minority affairs in the Roosevelt Administration to name some of her most notable accomplishments.

The inaugural ceremony of the Bethune Museum and Archives in November of 1979 included a two-day conference entitled, “Black Women: A Research Priority-The

First National Scholarly Research Conference on Black Women”, was also the first of its kind. Collier-Thomas was the genius behind both the institute and the conference, garnering funding from The National Endowment for the Humanities. It coincided with the NCNW’s (National Council of Negro Women) convention and attracted more than two thousand people from all walks of life including academics, organizational leaders, representatives of federal agencies, and laypersons. The session topics ranged, but included “Black Women in the Church,” which Evelyn-Brooks Higginbotham and Collier-Thomas, herself, presented papers.¹⁵³

Though black women had always been active in the civil rights movement, which then lead to more boycotting, marching, walk-outs, and over-taking of Administration buildings to fight for black inclusion as faculty on predominately white university campuses, the major accomplishments spear-headed by Collier-Thomas further legitimized and canonized black women’s primary sources and scholarship. No longer was it a case of male (black and white) sociologists writing about black women and their families without concern of scholarly reprisal from some black female and male colleagues. The political upheavals in the sixties and seventies would lay the foundation for some of the most heated academic debates i.e. the inclusion of students and scholars of color, lesbian and straight women along with gay male faculty into university programs, and it would be a time that would mark some of the most significant cultural landmarks.

Yet, with all of the outward gains, made by black people and more specifically, black men, black women were confronted with another longstanding debate. A debate

¹⁵³ For more information on both of these significant events see Collier-Thomas’s discussion in *Daughters of Thunder*.

that would demand they take the side of either race or gender. However, one of the major contributions of black feminists thought is that it actually changed the terms of this debate with ideas such as intersectionality.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the sixties were critical because it would carve out a space for black women as a legitimate force to be reckoned with by the start of the seventies. It was 1966 when white feminist scholar, Betty Friedan, along with 27 other women activists would found NOW, (the National Organization for Women). Over the years, African American women activists and scholars would have a tense relationship with NOW. The years were filled with some white women feminists wondering about black women's sincerity to the cause of liberation and some black men questioning and attacking the femininity of black women who dared to take on roles of leadership during the civil rights movement.

As black women had done decades before when the same attack was launched post-bellum for the right to vote, when as a race they understood the importance of black men gaining the right to vote, but they also new the significance of women garnering that power as well. Just as it had been before, black women were only mildly distracted by the criticisms of her fellow Americans, instead many of them continued to run organizations, stage marches and boycotts, go to college, obtain degrees and enter the academy poised for action. As academics, they wrote scholarship that challenged antiquated binaries and argued that their race and gender worked in tandem to inform them of their multiple locations as it pertained to politics, women's and civil rights.

It is within the ivy-leaved halls of the university that black feminists and womanists working as social scientists, historians, artists, writers, and all other categories

¹⁵⁴ Springer, *Revolution*, 88-89.

of educators that they would systematically address the void of black women's history within their disciplines. The Moynihan report was still fresh on the minds of black intellectuals and essays like Angela Davis', "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," written while Davis was imprisoned on false allegations of conspiracy and murder¹⁵⁵, would become a seminal piece for anyone doing black women's studies.¹⁵⁶ It was her foundational work and in it Davis sets straight the myths of black slave women's resistance, and stereotypes of black women and matriarchy. She also brought to light the disregard of black women's scholarship and history in the historical record.

By the time Davis was writing "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," the fields of history, sociology, and anthropology were borrowing research methods from one another and that was in large part due to the civil rights and women's movements of the sixties. College students, new faculty members, and the start of African American, Women's, and Ethnic Studies programs forced a shift in the humanities and the social sciences that centered these groups. Not like in times passed when those who made up these communities were discussed as mere objects or problems, but the new literature would center them and their life experiences as substantial subjects in and of themselves. Thus, historians and sociologists were now in dialogue with one another and again the black family and black mothers would be placed at the crux of the conversation but in a different light.

¹⁵⁵ Angela Davis a major figure in the black freedom struggle of the 1960s was acquitted in 1972.

¹⁵⁶ For more on Davis and her political relationship as an activist to the Black Power movement can be found in *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*.

Black women scholars were publishing anthologies and whole books focusing on black women's experiences en masse. The seventies was also a period of unearthing black women's history and documenting primary sources. In literature, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970) was one of the earliest literary anthologies with noted contemporary writers of essays and poems like Eleanor Traylor, Frances Beale, and Verta Mae Smart-Grosvenor, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall and Bambara, all writing in the literary tradition of black feminists discourse. The reader would find poems sprinkled amongst critical essays and short stories all written by and about black women. For those scholars publishing in the social sciences, Joyce A. Ladner's *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (1971), is one of the earliest ethnographic studies of black girls coming of age in an urban community. In it, she described her own initial struggle with how to negotiate her locations of detached sociologist and that of "attached" black woman. She was both the anthropologist come to *recover* the lost, overlooked or forgotten information, and too, part of the subject community of black women which allowed her to further disengage with traditional methods of study that reasoned she be an *objective* observer.

Ladner, like those writers featured in *The Black Woman*, were responding to old and new theories of deviance, blaming the victim, and patriarchy, which all tended to focus squarely on black communities. In addition, while black women scholars were writing in the tradition of descriptive, corrective and prescriptive approaches to black women's history, they were also addressing their white feminist colleagues who either still did not want to put the concerns of women of color at the fore of their activists efforts or those white feminists who ignored their own perpetuation of racism and

classism within the movement. However, as the movement went on, and by the time the Supreme Court passed *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which declared that the constitutional right to privacy included a woman's right to abort, many black feminist had joined forces with their white colleagues. It also must be stated that much of the criticism of the movement came from its largest critics.¹⁵⁷

Those men that did not support the women's movement, through their rhetoric, tried to reinforce women's more traditional roles as housewives or sexual objects were quick to encourage notions of racial genocide. Debates surrounding legalizing abortions was also not one sided amongst black women. Shirley Chisholm wrote in her essay, "Facing the Abortion Question", that "...I do not know any black or Puerto Rican women who feel that way. To label family planning and legal abortion programs 'genocide' is male rhetoric, for male ears. It falls flat to female listeners and to thoughtful male ones".¹⁵⁸ Although the majority of black men may not have been in opposition to black women making gains, there were still those with dissenting voices, yet it would still not hinder the progress made by black women.

Tensions between Black Women and Men

Black men write a lot about 'castrating' black females and feel righteous in doing so. But when black women write about the incest, rape, and sexual violence committed by black men against black females of all ages, and when black women write that black men are

¹⁵⁷ There were many grassroots black feminists groups operating during the sixties and seventies like the Combahee River collective statement.

¹⁵⁸ Chisholm, "Abortion," 113-122.

castrators and oppressors of black women, black men accuse them of sowing seeds of 'division' in the black community. When black male writers write of the brotherhood of black men in the struggle for manhood, this is viewed as manly and fitting. But when black women write about the sisterhood of black women, black men brand them as 'feminist bitches.'

Calvin Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers*

Paradoxically, within the movement, black feminists were also at odds with some black men activists. Though black feminists distinguished their fight for liberation from that of white feminists as one that encompassed fighting racial oppression alongside their black *brothas* (added emphasis), and that their fight was not a monolithic struggle against sexism, black men were also at the peak of their revolutionary urgings which included for some, re-inscribing misogynistic norms.¹⁵⁹ Essayist and former Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver, was one such individual who in his much-celebrated work, *Soul On Ice* (1965), went far beyond chauvinism. Cleaver admitted to having raped white women after he had "practiced" on black women.¹⁶⁰ He confessed, "I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto...and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey...Rape was an insurrectionary act. It

¹⁵⁹ Tracye Matthews, " 'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party 1966-1971" in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998) pp. 285-288.

¹⁶⁰ Cleaver, 27.

delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women.”¹⁶¹

Unfortunately, Cleaver was not the only man to express himself in such problematic ways, Imamu Amiri Baraka, another leading black writer and activist of the sixties, seemed to also find his frailty as a man in the hold of the white woman.¹⁶² In his book of poetry entitled, *The Dead Lecturer*, Baraka spoke of “raping white girls,” in his poem, *Black Dada Nihilismus*. The irony was that African American women who worked as leaders and organizers in the movement and who had struggled with joining alliances with white feminists because of their myopia as it concerned the interconnectedness of race and gender had somehow become the enemy to some black male activists.

Likewise, the southern Civil Rights activists also struggled with sexism. Civil Rights activists, Ella Baker, dared to criticize the Southern male leaders of the sixties for their complicity with oppressive sexist ideologies, which did nothing for the “people” but only worked to exalt a charismatic (male) leader.

Basically, I think personally, I've always felt that the Association (NAACP) got itself hung-up in what I call its legal success. Having had so many outstanding legal successes, it definitely seemed to have oriented its thinking in the direction that the way to achieve was through the courts. It hasn't departed too far from that yet. So, I said to you that when I came out of the Depression, I came out of it with a different point of view as to

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶² Later, in the same chapter, Cleaver admits that his wrongdoings were indications of his own lack of “self-respect”.

what constituted success...I began to feel that my greatest sense of success would be to succeed in doing with people some of the things that I thought would raise the level of the masses of people, rather than the individual being accepted by the Establishment. [Carol Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of 'Participatory Democracy,'" in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965* Vicki L. Crawford et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p. 61.

Baker shared these sentiments with an interviewer in June of 1968, only two months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Her activism would include a philosophy steeped in meeting the needs of the people. While the overall success of the NAACP's strategy of going through the courts was felt by all, the masses of black people were financially unable to have their grievances redressed in the courts. Thus, the NAACP was never an organization of the masses. This was Baker's chief criticism of the movement, which until the Nationalist movement of the late 60s and 70s, would continue to insist on a hierarchical strategy for racial upliftment. In fact, Baker's critique demonstrated the areas of agreement between Daniel Patrick Moynihan, black ministers, and black powerites.

Aside from distracting from what appeared to be a unified fight for full integration through litigation, the underlying concern of those leaders and organizations presented with the idea of turning the movement over to the masses, would have undoubtedly included gender politics. Baker asserted as much when she explained her own relationship with the leaders of the SCLC,

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference felt that they could influence how things went. They were interested in having the students become an arm of SCLC. They were most confident that this would be their baby, because I was their functionary and I had called the meeting. At a discussion called by the Reverend Dr. King, the SCLC leadership made decisions [about] who would speak to whom to influence the students to become part of SCLC. Well, I disagreed. There was no student at Dr. King's meeting. I was the nearest thing to a student, being the advocate, you see. I also knew from the beginning that having a woman be an executive of SCLC was not something that would go over with the male-dominated leadership. And then, of course, my personality wasn't right, in the sense I was not afraid to disagree with the higher authorities. I wasn't one to say, yes, because it came from the Reverend King. So when it was proposed that the leadership could influence the direction by speaking to, let's say, the man from Virginia, he could speak to the leadership of the Virginia student group, and the assumption was that having spoken to so-and so, so-and-so would do what they wanted done, I was outraged. I walked out. (84)

Although an unfortunate exchange, debates and criticisms over leadership strategies were not new to the movement.

Birth Control or Genocide

Some of the tension between black men and women would ironically be over black women's reproductive freedom. More to the point, during the 1960s and 1970s some black men were stringently opposed to black women (and men) using any form of birth control. Most of these were part of the Black Nationalist Movement, whose party had taken a stand of anti-birth control, which was at the time likened to genocide. It was not that these fears were unfounded on the part of the movement. The issue of birth control being likened to that of genocide or "race suicide" as it was formally known extended back to the 1920s and 1930s. Black Nationalist, Marcus Garvey's U.N.I.A. strongly opposed birth control for black people, arguing that it went against God's purpose for humanity at their seventh annual meeting held in 1934 asserting, "any attempt to interfere with the natural function of life is a rebellion against the conceived purpose of divinity in making man a part of His spiritual self".¹⁶³

While W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier's involvement with the birth control movement has already been described, it is important to again emphasize why they felt birth control should be an important aspect in the lives of black people. In the *Crisis* magazine, Du Bois wrote that birth control was a matter of "science and sense applied to the bringing of children into the world".¹⁶⁴ Not believing that birth control was a panacea, in the article, "Birth Control for More Negro Babies" in 1945, Frazier yet believed and pointed out that "more and more babies born indiscriminately, without thought of the parent's health or ability to rear them, is not the answer".¹⁶⁵ Hence, there

¹⁶³ Nancy Lurkins, "'You are the Race, You are the Seeded Earth:' Intellectual Rhetoric, American Fiction, and Birth Control in the Black Community," <http://www.eiu.edu/~historia/archives/2008/Historia2008Lurkins.pdf>. pp. 58-59.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Frazier, 41-44.

were those on both sides of the argument at the start of the birth control movement. In the sixties and seventies, black power militants both male and female along with other outspoken radicals were also against the use of birth control. In 1971, *Ebony* magazine ran the provocative cover story, “My Answer to Genocide,” in it social critic-humorist Dick Gregory responded to birth control advocates:

For years they told us where to sit, where to eat, and where to live. Now they want to dictate our bedroom habits. First the white man tells me to sit in the back of the bus. Now it looks like he wants me to sleep under the bed. Back In the days of slavery, black folks couldn't grow kids fast enough for white folks to harvest. Now that we've got a little taste of power, white folks want us to call a moratorium on having children.¹⁶⁶

The Black Panther Party took a slightly different view on the matter; theirs (like Garvey) was a matter of numbers. Once the abortion law was relaxed in the state of New York in the seventies, the Party argued, “Black people know that part of our revolutionary strength lies in the fact that we outnumber the pigs—and the pigs realize this too. This is why they are trying to eliminate as many people as possible before they reach their inevitable doom” (*The Black Panther*, 1970). Just as black men had seemingly taken the lead in the public debate on the relevance of birth control, some black women quickly responded to what they felt was the absurdity of (black) men having a say over their reproductive options one way or the other. The Vice-President of the separatist Republic of New Africa, Dara Abubakari (Virginia E. Y. Collins) expressed:

¹⁶⁶ Gregory, 66.

Women must be free to choose what they want. They should be free to decide if and when they want children. Maybe in this phase of the game we feel that we don't need any children because we have to fight the liberation struggle. So we won't have any children. We have the right to say so. Men shouldn't tell us.¹⁶⁷

In the same vein, historian, Robert Weisbord reported on a Black Women's Liberation group in Mount Vernon, New York, whose manifesto was "signed by two welfare recipients, two housewives, a domestic and others." The manifesto asserted:

Black women are being asked by militant black brothers, not to practice birth control because it's a form of Whitey's committing genocide on black people. Well, true enough, but it takes two to practice genocide and black women are able to decide for themselves, like poor people all over the world whether they will submit to genocide. For us birth control is the freedom to fight genocide of black women and children.... Having too many babies stops us from supporting our children. Teaching them the truth...and from fighting black men who still want to use and exploit us.¹⁶⁸

Not all black women sided with the pro-birth control argument, but those who dissented generally were between the Nationalist and Black Muslim Parties. For instance, a female Panther by the name of Brenda Hyson was vehemently opposed to abortion. Hyson explained in the Black Panther organ, "It was just a matter of time

¹⁶⁷ Abubakari, pp. 360-361.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Weisbord, *Birth Control and the Black Community in the 1960s: Genocide or Power Politics* in <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Birth+control+and+the+black+community+in+the+1960s%3a+genocide+or+power+...-a020574139>.

before voluntary abortion led to involuntary abortion and compulsory sterilization”.¹⁶⁹

However, after an attack on the family planning clinics in the communities, welfare mothers who were part of the Welfare Rights Organization eloquently summed the issue up by declaring:

We think a mother can better care for her family if she can control the number of children she bears, and we think that a mother deserves the opportunity to decide when her health and well-being is better served by preventing conception." Most of the anti-birth control pressure is coming from men! Men who do not have to bare the children. We are speaking for the women and we want the Planned Parenthood Centers to stay in our neighborhoods.¹⁷⁰

Needless to say, their efforts paid off and because of a “few hundred poor black women,” the attempts of some to close down the birth-control clinics in their neighborhood was blocked and monies that were designated for family planning was restored.

Single Mothers and Welfare Queens

Abortion and birth control were still hot topics in the 1980s and 1990s, but with the election of Republican President Ronald Reagan, the 1980s became a decade of conservative politics that had little compassion for women who found themselves with unwanted pregnancies, or single mothers who received public assistance. Similarly,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid..

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

images of mothers and fathers beholden to the welfare system were also made popular in documentaries of poor urban communities like Bill Moyers's *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America* (1986). Filmed in Newark, New Jersey, Moyers interviewed several low-income couples about their unemployment, pregnancies, and sexual habits. The urbanites in *The Vanishing Family* are depicted as complacent, lazy, reckless, and promiscuous.

The images of young black mothers “waiting on a welfare check,” and young black fathers sauntering around the streets of Newark carelessly and without regard for their children's well-being harkened back to the Moynihan Report twenty years before, but now black matriarchs were superseded by welfare queens. The welfare queen is “the lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check”.¹⁷¹ Moreover, in an interview with a young mother by the name of Alice, Moyers asked her about how it felt to be on welfare and Alice bashfully admitted “welfare makes you lazy”. We are told by Moyers that Timothy McSeed, the father of Alice's three children, is unemployed, has been in and out of jail on drug charges, and has fathered at least six children by several women. Timothy seems not to be phased by Moyers's implications of Tim's lazy and thoughtless character when Moyers asked him about how he felt about having so many “kids he wasn't supporting,” Timothy does not blink an eye and explained that welfare gives the mothers a “stipend”.

Needless to say, many African Americans were in an uproar when they saw this depiction of the black family and Moyers was forced to do another documentary called *The Aftermath* wherein he shifts locations to a well-known church in Washington, D.C.

¹⁷¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 17.

and interviews middle-class black people about their experiences. However, the damage had been done and similar images of irresponsible young black parents would be used to affect welfare reform in the nineties. Another example of what came to be discussed as welfare abuse was the case of the “Chicago 19.” In 1994, during a raid in a housing project, police found nineteen “barely clothed” children in a “rat and roach infested” apartment. They were the children of five sisters who were all on public assistance amounting to five thousand dollars a month.¹⁷² This case along with the *Vanishing Family* came to be used as examples of lazy black people stealing from taxpayers. Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* relays a typical comment heard by the Milwaukee Welfare Rights Organization:

You give those lazy, shiftless good-for-nothings an inch and they’ll take a mile. You have to make it tougher on them. They’re getting away with murder now. You have to catch all those cheaters and put them to work or put them in jail. Get them off the welfare rolls. I’m tired of those niggers coming to our state to get on welfare. I’m tired of paying their bills just so they can sit around home having babies, watching their color televisions, and driving Cadillacs.¹⁷³

The insidiousness of this comment summed up the general perception of women on public assistance during the 1980s, so it would come as no surprise that in the next decade, vast public policy changes would be made as it related to poor families.¹⁷⁴ In the

¹⁷² Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷⁴ Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

early 1990s a more liberal shift occurred in the White House with the election of Democratic President Bill Clinton. Interestingly enough, it would be during the Clinton Administration that the nation would see an overhaul of past welfare system into what became the Welfare Reform Act in August of 1996. Most poor mothers were unsure what to expect, just as most of the country. In Clinton's reform bill he planned to give states more control over AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) programs through a new program called TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Also, the welfare reform act would, from then on, be known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The reform limited the number of years a family could receive assistance with a lifetime limit of five years and the heads of households would be required to find work within two years. According to Dorothy Roberts, "chief among the pathologies to be curtailed by new regulations is the birthrate of welfare mothers-mothers who were perceived to be black. Welfare reform has become the main arena for current schemes to restrict black female fertility, raising broader questions about state funding of reproduction".¹⁷⁵

Prior to the new reforms, sociologists, Bonnie Thornton Dill, went throughout the rural south interviewing single mothers who were also receiving welfare assistance. The ethnographic examination of the "survival strategies" implemented by these women that were responsible for being the "homemaker, provider, and mother", put a face and voice to those whose lives would be immediately changed by TANF and the PRWORA. Dill, along with Tallese Johnson, discovered in their research that "contrary to popular opinion, however, most women who received welfare worked for pay. In fact, most often they combined welfare and work because their low-wage jobs did not pay enough for

¹⁷⁵ Roberts, *Killing*, 202.

them to become self-sufficient in providing for their families and because welfare did not provide enough money for them to be dependent on it alone”.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, poor (black) women were too often at the contentious nexus of race, class, and gender conflict in public policy, which subsequently resulted in mothers and children being economically burdened by racist assumptions when it came to public assistance programs.

It is primarily because of fear that comes as a result of an assumed loss of privilege that when attempts are made to level the playing field when it comes to employment and social security, whites are more apt to vote against new policies.¹⁷⁷ In a recent Washington Post article, writer, Richard Morin, did a national survey looking at the racial disparities in “jobs, incomes, schooling, and healthcare” in America. The result was that for whites, when it was presumed that blacks were doing as well or better than whites, whites were then more likely to not be in favor of social reforms that they perceived would benefit black people. In reality, many of the whites surveyed were operating under “misperceptions” in these areas and were under the impression that blacks were fairing better in the U.S. than they are in actuality. For instance, according to Morin’s research,

Blacks are about twice as likely as whites—23 versus 12 percent—to hold lower-paying, less prestigious service jobs. Blacks also are more than twice as likely to be unemployed; in May (2001), the jobless rate for blacks stood at 8 percent, compared with 3.8 percent among

¹⁷⁶ Bonnie Thornton Dill, Tallese Johnson, “Between a Rock and Hard Place: Mothering, Work, and Welfare in the Rural South” in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed. Sharon Harley (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 67-83.

¹⁷⁷ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 215; Martin Gilens, “Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media” *Public Opinion Quarterly* Volume 60:515-541, 1996; Richard Morin, “Misperceptions Cloud Whites’ View of Blacks”, Washington Post.

whites...substantial differences persist between black and white earning. The median household income for whites was \$44,366 in 1999, compared with \$27,910 for blacks. Fewer than three in 10 whites earn less than \$25,000; nearly half of all blacks in 1999 earned less than that. And the poverty rate for African Americans is more than double the white rate.¹⁷⁸

What does this have to do with poor single mothers? African Americans are as recently as 2001 disproportionately underemployed or unemployed. Black women still earn less than black men and at the same time, if left with the sole responsibility of providing for a household, will be more likely to work in a low-earning position, yet many middle-class Americans are in favor of welfare reforms that limit poor mothers' access to state or federal financial resources. What do mothers do when they have to feed their children and government programs for reasonable violations penalize them? Dill and Johnson postulate from their study of rural, poor Mississippians that,

...The families dropped for violating the new work rules outnumbered those placed in jobs by a margin of nearly two to one. Families were dropped for violating work rules, which included such things as missed appointments and failure to take jobs. It appears many women may have turned down job offers or missed appointments because they did not have adequate transportation to travel to work, which in rural areas is a common problem. Nevertheless, these women lost all of their benefits. Thus it appears that the reduction of welfare caseloads is not entirely a result of getting women into the workforce.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸Morin, *Misperceptions*, 3.

What Roberts, Dill and Johnson all point out is that although initial reports of welfare reform seem to be successful in that more families have been dropped as caseloads, what is not clear (because there is no official record keeping) is what is happening to those families that are no longer receiving aid. Did we create a new class of homeless?

Since the Moynihan Report, scholarship on black families has changed considerably. Although, there are many recent studies on the impact of earnings, occupational patterns, employment, birthrates, and communities on black families, the research does not tend to focus on female-headedness (in those instances) as an inherent deficiency (Hill 1993; Staples; Dickerson 1995; Arnold 2002; Billingsley 1968, 1992). Even studies that specifically call attention to single-motherhood are more apt to explore this particular pattern with respect for the subjects and their lives, instead of viewing them as pathological elements in society that should be done away with as the Moynihan Report suggested (Dickerson 1995; Dill 2002). However, although the scholarship reflects a more progressive outlook on issues concerning black parenting, single motherhood, and even the poor, it also reflects a widening gap between those social scientists whose research reflects this new trend and their ability to impact public policy in a way that materially benefits poor mothers. In as much as a conversation about public policy and motherhood is about race and class, embedded within that same conversation is the discourse of black female sexuality.

Discussions of Black Sexuality in the Post-Industrial Era

¹⁷⁹ Dill and Johnson, *Hard Place*, 81.

For many black feminists in the years prior to and during the post-industrial era, their writings reflected a conscientious analysis of black women's sexuality in hetero and homosexual spheres, both of which converge when looking at motherhood as an institution (Lorde 1984; Hine 1995; Giddings 1995; Hammonds 1995; Jordan 1982; Clarke 1983). More to the point, embedded in discussions of black motherhood is the social construction of sexuality and according to sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, "efforts of the dominant group to control and exploit Blacks women's reproduction".¹⁸⁰

In the context of black motherhood, this means that historically, ideologically and in actuality black women's reproduction has been tied to the social construction of power. In fact, the sexual revolution experienced in the sixties and seventies, which led to white feminists publishing in large numbers on aspects of sexual oppression, male domination and control over women's sexuality, marriage, and motherhood would come to mean something entirely different for black women (Giddings 1995; Rich 1986; Petchesky 1984; Glenn and Chang and Forcey 1994).

According to Valerie Polakow, discussions of black motherhood often emphasize a lack of agency; she posits, "The daily struggles of women of color have frequently focused on their powerlessness in the social and economic institutions that structure their lives and those of their children".¹⁸¹ Paula Giddings takes this a step further and associates the "powerlessness" not with agency, but instead, it reflected a deeper schism between interlocking connections of sexuality and racial politics within African American discourse. In her essay "The Last Taboo," Giddings argued that, "it (the

¹⁸⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 166.

¹⁸¹ Valerie Polakow, "Motherhood" in *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), 382.

struggle) has changed because of two interrelated developments: the sexual revolution and de jure desegregation. They are interrelated because sex was the principle around which wholesale segregation and discrimination was organized with the ultimate objective of preventing intermarriage. The sexual revolution, however, separated sexuality from reproduction, and so diluted the ideas about purity—moral, racial, and physical”.¹⁸² Similarly, an examination of black motherhood as an institution allows for further analysis of black sexual politics that can simultaneously be about reproduction and sexuality.

However, discussions of sexuality and motherhood in African American feminist scholarship have been limited, with the exception of writers like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sdiane Bogus, and Gloria I. Joseph most critiques of black motherhood and lesbianism have come out of black feminist literary criticism. In the anthology, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*, Joseph asserted, “The research conducted on lesbians and their children are sparse, and what exists predominately concerns white lesbians...Black lesbian families will continue to develop as a divergent family/life pattern...Lesbian mothers have been an invisible part of society, and Black lesbian mothers are a shadow of the invisibility.”

Like heterosexual black mothers, Joseph explained, black lesbian mothers have to contend with multiple forms of oppression, however, unlike heterosexual mothers, lesbian mothers have the added burden of having to cope with heterosexual oppression. Black lesbian mothers, like Black heterosexual mothers are aware of the problems their daughters have to face coping in a racist, sexist, heterosexist society...The Black lesbian

¹⁸² Paula Giddings, “The Last Taboo” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 424.

mother has the additional burden/hardship/obscenity of having to face horrendous, hostile, heterosexist oppression.¹⁸³

I would add to Joseph's critique that what limits black feminist's historical examinations of sexuality and black women's lives are due to their own struggle to overcome heterosexism. In fact, notions of family, race, and sexuality are so tied to heterosexism within the black community that to challenge this tradition leads one to the perception that one's racial members of the community who have adopted a nationalist viewpoint would call "authenticity" into question. The late economist, Rhonda Williams eloquently described in her essay "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender" the essentialist tradition that has pervaded critiques of (black) family patterns:

In the ideologies of contemporary cultural nationalism, families are *the* sanctioned site for the reproduction of authentic racial ethnic culture.

Healthy families are monogamous, dedicated to masculine authority, and affirm traditional gender roles; unwell families include sexually promiscuous adults and foster female dominance.¹⁸⁴

What does this all mean? It means that binaries between race and sexuality have to be removed if we are to locate power within the institution of black motherhood in historical and cultural analyses. As we move beyond conservative ideas of family

¹⁸³ Gloria I. Joseph, "Black Mothers and Daughters: Traditional and New Perspectives" in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 104-105.

¹⁸⁴ Rhonda Williams, "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender" in *The House that Race Built* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 144.

structure in scholarship, popular culture has continued to emphasize essentialist constructions of race, gender, and the family.

Claudine

Although readers would start to see scholarship reflecting these dynamic shifts in paradigms, in the post-industrial era, there would be few films that would enjoy mainstream success that would illustrate boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality being equally empowering for examinations of black motherhood. However, the film *Claudine* by white filmmaker John Berry, which predates the post-industrial age by at least two decades, marks as a transition film from the mid-seventies that would be one of the first according to film critic, Donald Bogle, in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* to “explore a black woman’s tensions or aspirations or to examine the dynamics of sexual politics within the black community”. *Claudine*, played by Diahann Carroll, is an unwed mother with six children, she is a welfare recipient and sexually active. The film concentrated “best on the issues and conflicts confronting a contemporary urban black woman”. What made Berry’s *Claudine* different from stereotypical images of the welfare queen was that *Claudine* was an intelligent depiction of a woman who had had some failed relationships, which left her with several children, but through her experiences audiences are made to see the humanity of those most impacted by poverty.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1993) pp. 252-254.

Filmmaker, John Berry, made what would later become a black movie classic in *Claudine*, according to Bogle. There was no lone super hero seeking revenge or trying to escape corrupt cops as was made popular in Blaxploitation films of the seventies; on the contrary, it was billed as a lively family dramedy. A mix of comedy and drama, *Claudine* was also sentimental and didactic in a plot that offers very little in the way of solutions to racial and gender inequalities, only thoughtful and clever critiques. However, although the main character, Claudine, is able to offer up insightful commentaries of her oppression, some aspects of her character do not ring true, for instance she seems at times oblivious to the problems in her own home and ill equipped to handle them. Her children talk back to her, who as Bogle pointed out, “they strike more as suburban youngsters than ghetto children”.¹⁸⁶

Claudine was supposed to have embodied the spirit of the new black woman, albeit urban and working class, and reflects the condition of single motherhood. Moreover, through Claudine, Berry addresses the inequalities reflected in low-income households, sexism, reproduction and state-controlled sexuality. It made sense that Berry would chose a young, black, working-class couple in Claudine and Roop, played by James Earl Jones, to sound off on these issues. For who would understand and better express and represent the American underclass in the seventies? Intentionally, Claudine, her children, and Roop were not unaffected and were conscious of their own location in popular discourse.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

For the most part, Berry crafts adult black characters that are knowledgeable and three-dimensional, albeit with a lack of sophistication in storytelling at crucial moments in the film. Claudine and Roop are sharp and witty in a thoughtful way, especially in scenes like the ones between Claudine's family and the nosy caseworker that drops by Claudine's home intermittently and unexpectedly to make sure there is no male living with her and to monitor the possessions in her home and regulate Claudine's behavior. Literally, the caseworker's job is to make a determination about the neediness of a poor family based upon the amount and kinds of appliances in the client's home. Again, an illustration of how state welfare programs were operating prior to, throughout the seventies, and beyond.¹⁸⁷

Although Berry's idea of creating a film that centers urban and poor African Americans and true to its decade, introduce class as an essential element to dialogues of oppression, he seems to not know what to do with a black woman who has so many children. Throughout the film, Claudine's children are in random places and situations that she appears to be almost ignorant of, in fact, she is the quintessential damsel in distress, herein lies the necessity of a strong male figure that will be able to earn the children's respect and get them under control. Berry, true to his time, falls back on traditional notions of gender roles as reflected in the film. Although Claudine has raised her children by herself, (except for intermittent romantic liaisons), Berry asks the audience to believe that without a husband (not a lover) her household was on the verge of falling into chaos. Roop is the reluctant stabilizer of Claudine's home. It is his presence in Claudine's life that makes and centers her household into a home and family.

¹⁸⁷ Roberts, *Killing*, 205-206.

Ironically, Roop already has two other families that he is not present for and is not interested in being responsible for Claudine's.

The film simultaneously and brilliantly critiques poverty as to how it impacts the lives of poor black men and women with children, while adhering to traditional stereotypes of white middle-class normative family patterns. It appears that part of Berry's direction was suggesting that it is precisely because of such wanton behavior that these children are in existence (or maybe this is the viewpoint of Tina and Les Pine, the screenwriters), while at the same time Claudine delivers a brilliant speech signaling her awareness of her location as a woman of color in the American welfare system.

Roop: So ah, what, you about Thirty?

Claudine: Thirty, didn't you see my big boy? I got a boy 18.

Roop: Some girls have kids when they're 13, 12.

Claudine: Hmm, I was eighteen.

Roop: You thirty-six! Holy Christ, how'd you wind up with six kids?

Claudine: (*Indignantly*) Haven't you heard about us ignorant black bitches, always got to be laying up with some dude, just grinding out them babies for the taxpayers to take care of. I get thirty dollars a piece for them kids. I'm living like a queen on welfare.

Roop: You're jumpy.

Claudine: Well, my kids are fine, you don't need to be worried about my kids.

Roop: No, no I'm not worried about your kids, not my problem.

Claudine: ... You know I had two marriages and two almost marriages.

Similarly, Roop is a hardworking garbage man, but viewers find out that he, too, has children in two other cities that he never sees. Yet, Roop also articulated his knowledge of the stereotypes surrounding black men as studs who do not care for their children.

Roop: Groovey, I had a couple of them (marriages) myself.

Claudine: Well, how come you don't have no kids, a man your age?

Roop: Well, I got two boys in Ohio with my first wife and a little girl in Louisville with my second wife's mother.

Claudine: May I ask you something? You got a hell of a nerve asking me about my six kids, do you ever see your kids?

Roop: No.

Claudine: You mean you don't even see your own children?

Roop: Well, you know us black studs, no feelings, knock'em up and leave, hardly give a ___ if their children starve. Now you pushin' on my buttons, lady.

Thus, Berry has constructed these wildly complex characters that in all actuality leave the moviegoer wandering who to cheer for. The film is sprinkled throughout with brilliant insights into the welfare system, child support and poverty, in fact, the characters spend so much time making these insightful connections that we rarely see them spending time with the children or even working at their places of employment. Instead, Claudine and Roop seem to spend their days and nights together struggling with trying to figure out how it is that they might make it so (legally) the children will continue to get aid without them becoming Roop's "problem" after he and Claudine wed.

At the end, Roop and Claudine get married, but there is no more discussion of Roop spending time with his own biological children by these other women. Claudine's

younger children have grown to love and care for Roop. The eldest and militant son even comes to his mother's rescue after Roop has a bout of cold feet and runs off. He searches and finds Roop in a bar and after a short and messy fight scene, Roop comes to realize he needs to stop running away from women i.e. children and take responsibility. Ironically, the militant opts for a vasectomy to ensure that he does not father children. *Claudine*, though provocative, has its most powerful moments when she and Roop are forced to deal with the reality of their economic fate at the hands of the welfare system. Just as striking as the characters critiques of welfare is Berry's depiction of their sexuality.

Claudine is not the repressed (white) housewife (of the fifties) or the asexual black woman (*Imitation of Life*). The audience is invited to gaze upon her beauty as she is sometimes barely covered in romantic scenes with Roop (and on one occasion only covered by bubbles as she languishes in his bathtub). The camera positions her body for consumption by the (male) audience. Roop, too, is the archetypal black buck that impregnates but abdicates all responsibility to the mother. He, too, is displayed unrobed in romantic scenes; while audiences are invited into the bedroom of Claudine and Roop to witness the impulsive and casual way they choose lovers (they consummate their relationship on the first date). Berry seems to suggest that black men and women do not have time to court and thus, develop meaningful relationships, instead, it is through sex that meaning is developed (this too is quite possibly more a reflection of Berry's own sexism than racism). Although *Claudine*, as a film has its shortcomings, black audiences were still able to engage it. It must have struck a nerve with white audiences as well, Diahann Carroll and James Earl Jones were both nominated for Golden Globes and Carroll was nominated for an Oscar. Nonetheless, *Claudine* was the vision of white

filmmakers; hence, it does not tell us as much about African American women as it does about the politics of its creators.

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

Similarly, some black male filmmakers have tended to concentrate on the male protagonists as being in direct confrontation with the outside world i.e. white (Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), and *Get On the Bus* (1996)). Though not in every instance, many black women filmmakers and writers have focused more on black women's everyday experiences of racism and sexism. Womanist writer, Alice Walker, explored themes like race, class, sexuality, and gender as they impacted the lives of her female protagonists. However, what do we do when the writer writes her story into the text? Such is the case for Walker's book of Womanist prose, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). A Womanist is one who is "committed to (the) survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," that will provide the framework by which we should understand the lives, work, and history of twentieth century black women.¹⁸⁸

In Search of Our Mothers Gardens' is quite literally a journey that Walker takes her readers on to reclaim writers that had previously been lost to a wide readership or their books had simply gone out of print and to reevaluate those that we held dear and for many the very cause of one's love of literature. As a collection of prose, the book would capture the spirit of what turn of the century writer Pauline Hopkins referred to as doing the work for ourselves by "portraying the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro..."

¹⁸⁸ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), xi.

Yet, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* reflects even more than that, it is also ethnography of sorts that captured the most creative woman in Walker's life, her mother. As Walker and her mother journey to discover the former home of writer Flannery O'Connor, Walker allows the reader to witness the unfolding of her own familial journey as she reveals moment by moment the earnestness, lack of understanding, support, and fondness she and her mother share.

Though there is any number of questions that Walker centers on and tries to flesh out within *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, this research is most concerned with her use of personal criticism that she uses to frame the stories of writers who have been lost and recovered in literary history. "How is it that black (women) writers can die in virtual obscurity and poverty and their life's work literally has to be salvaged before anyone remembers they were missing?" This is one of the questions Walker asks, and in her answering literally ensures her mother's own creative legacy by using her story to reflect the ease at which it is to overlook the creative genius of black women because there is no one to record her story.

Walker eloquently struggles with the task of recording as she reveals her own *search* as a writer and, dare say, a black woman, from the beginnings of teaching an African American studies class to functionally literate rural women, to teaching and being taught by her own mother as they search for the home of the late southern writer, Flannery O'Connor. Walker searches for the answer to the questions that possibly only the creative force in African American women would earnestly think to ask. "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime

for a black person to read or write”?¹⁸⁹ Just as in the case of *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, this research is the writer’s own search to find and better understand how black women have literally *made sense* out of the madness they were born into.

As Walker posits, many of the early women writers like Phyllis Wheatley and Zora Neale Hurston lived and wrote with “evidence of ‘contrary instincts’”.¹⁹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois would have described it as a kind of “double consciousness” only the struggle was not with being black and American, the struggle was being conscious of the worldview that situates black women as “mules” against their own understanding of creative power. This consciousness was not something that most African American grandmothers and mothers wrote about in Walker’s aptly used analogy of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, whereby black women were able to seclude themselves and write peaceably without disturbance. The artistry that was birthed out of the women that came before came about in the midst of working in the fields, raising children, cooking, cleaning, making clothes, making quilts for beds out of necessity, instead of sentiment or quaintness. Yet, they were artists just the same.

Walker lovingly describes her own mother’s storytelling and the ability to “adorn with flowers whatever shabby house” her family lived in at the time as evidence of her mother’s artistry. She begins by saying,

And so it is, certainly, with my own mother...no song or poem will bear my mother’s name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have

¹⁸⁹ Walker, *Garden*, 234.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories-like her life-must be recorded.¹⁹¹

Walker next explains her mother's curious gift with gardens,

She planted ambitious gardens-and still does-with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees-until night came and it was too dark to see. Whatever she planted grew as if by magic and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties.¹⁹²

At the end of the essay, Walker poetically comments, "in search of my mother's garden, I found my own".¹⁹³ Who else will tell and appreciate the story of the black woman in America, if not her daughters'? *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is so much more than a book of Womanist prose. In her essays, Walker is able to span two centuries of work and narratives of writers black and non-black in order to explore the scope of the impact of art being birthed under peculiar circumstances. Of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1974, Walker writes to the editor of MS magazine, "...And I have asked myself: who will stop this slinging of mud on the character of the

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹² Ibid., 241.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 243.

black woman? Who will encourage the tenderness that seeks to blossom in young black men? Who will stand up and say ‘Black women, at least, have had enough!’”¹⁹⁴

Walker goes on to explain,

When we look back over our history it is clear that we have neglected to save just those people who could help us most. Because no matter what anyone says, it is the black woman’s words that have the most meaning for us, her daughters, because, she, like us, has experienced life not only as a black person, but as a woman; and it was different being Frederick Douglass than being Harriet Tubman-or Sojourner Truth, who only ‘looked like a man,’ but bore children and saw them sold into slavery. I thought of the black women writers and poets whose books-even today-go out of print while other works about all of us, less valuable if more ‘profitable,’ survive to insult us with their half-perceived, half-rendered ‘truths’. How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mothers’ names.¹⁹⁵

As Walker so eloquently articulated that were it not for the stories of our mother’s we would have no roots and those are the roots that provide us humanity in a world that seems to negate black women’s (and men’s) humanness. Beautifully written, *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* was cutting edge at the time of its publication in 1983. Walker’s use of personal criticism interwoven with literary criticism went against the traditional forms, which privileged a more dispassionate and objective analysis. According to Laurie McMillan,

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 274.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 275-276.

Walker's essays use three important motifs to render their work both concretely specific and symbolically representative: houses, mothers, and flowers or gardens. As the personal becomes presented as story complete with metaphorical language, readers are encouraged to interpret the narrative both literally and figuratively rather than reduce it to either one person's experience (and thus not terribly important in a wide-ranging sense) or to a "mere" story (and thus not terribly pressing because it is not "real" or "true"). Each of the three motifs functions among the essays in particular ways to forward Walker's project and her call for others to engage in issues of social justice and literary heritage (sic). While each is always literal on one level, houses also symbolize literary roots and traditions that take various forms, the mother points to literary precursors, and flowers or gardens represent an idealized field of African American women's literary heritage. The images together work within a single though diverse project of literary recuperation and growth.¹⁹⁶

In other words, black feminist's critiques do the multiple works of intersecting race, class, gender, and sexuality in addition to using personal narrative to explain broader social concepts. Black women's retelling of history through personal writings like those found in diaries, editorials, and non-fiction are some of the only ways this research has uncovered black women's thoughts on motherhood specifically and in general. Although Walker is not explicitly critiquing the institution, in as much as she is

¹⁹⁶ Laurie McMillan, "Telling A Critical Story: Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004), under "Alice Walker Tells a Critical Story," http://lion.chadwyck.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/searchFulltext.do?id=R03562945&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1235932924_19861&trailId=11F28D9030D&area=abell&forward=critref_ft.

situating the work (i.e. artistry) of black mothers. The disruptive use of the metaphorical garden running parallel to the dominant discourses simultaneously disrupts that discourse and I argue, repositions black mothers as self-conscious agents able to critique public discourse, craft counter narratives, and create meaning.

In sum, the organizing of black feminists was not in response to or directed by white feminism. Black feminists were organizing in the 1960s and most of those groups were in operation until the 1980s. They not only fought against public discourse that negatively stereotyped black women, they challenged white women and black men on notions of womanhood, sexuality, and activism. Black lesbian mothers have even had to challenge the heterosexism prevalent among other black feminists.

Through it all, black feminists have witnessed the political climate swing from one end of the pendulum to the other and on either side, poor mothers have suffered. Even as popular films like *Claudine* attempt to critique the institutional racism embedded within the welfare system, documentaries like *The Vanishing Family* perpetuate negative stereotypes of young black mothers and fathers. Simultaneously, public discourse is overwhelmingly negative surrounding single mothers, while the works of black feminists are in place to counter its hegemony. Literature by black women writers like Alice Walker introduce provocative methods in writing prose that empower black mothers as active subjects that are able to tell their own stories, not objects to be observed and written about. In short, it proves that the personal is political.

Chapter 6~Re-envisioning Mothering Studies

Conclusion

This project began as an attempt to theorize a space for black motherhood. The goal from the beginning was not to conflate womanhood and motherhood or posit that motherhood is an essential part of all women. By relying on a theoretical framework that supports this location as important and worthy of study, this dissertation offers multiple locations where black motherhood has operated as a catalyst for major discursive shifts within academia, public policy, and popular culture.

As the research went on, I evaded self-help or pregnancy manuals that specifically cater to black mothers because they did not yield a critique of African American motherhood as an institution that is influenced, altered, and manipulated simultaneously by race, class, gender, and sexuality. The same approach was given to literature that “praised” the black mother’s efforts in raising her children because they offered an already biased view, reflecting a trend in contemporary popular literature.

From this perspective, the questions that most concerned me were: What are some of the major writings pertaining to the study of black motherhood in the academy? What was said about these women in these works? If negative, how and why were these conclusions drawn? How impactful was the research in the academy or in popular culture? What were black women saying about motherhood? Do the works of black women challenge competing discourses on motherhood? In popular culture, how have these messages either evolved or differed depending on whose telling the story? When we look at the discourse over time, what were some of the significant political, social, or

cultural moments that black motherhood discourse was shaped in and by? Were there similarities/differences in these moments? Lastly, how have contemporary black feminists helped to shape the discourse?

I needed to work through the development of a discursive history left by black women that presumably paralleled that of popular critics and images. Thinking more specifically about motherhood, this dissertation is interested in focusing on what these overlapping conversations tell us about the study of black motherhood simultaneously from multiple locations. Although this is not an exhaustive discursive history of African American motherhood, this project does offer a more complex approach in order to flesh out a fuller understanding of the matter. Additionally, I have attempted to stay away from limited critiques which position the institution as purely resistive or practical. I have offered a view of motherhood which illustrates black women's complicated relationship to motherhood functioning as a political, practical, economic, or theoretically based construct depending on the historical moment.

The first chapter of this dissertation focuses theoretically and historically on black women's "self-definition" as "cultural readers". They are self-consciously developing valuable meanings in works by and about them. By examining how all of these messages connect in their offerings to the study of black motherhood, it is clear that feminist's communities have provided the most empowering location for critiquing black mother's subjectivity. By positing that black feminist theory remains one of the best sites from which to theorize motherhood and reproductive rights, this chapter presents an outline of the theoretical literature on motherhood and shows how there are three modes of thought-one approach is to investigate motherhood from an historical perspective, the other is the

cultural construct, and lastly, the practical or experiential knowledge by which the experience is judged. At the end of this chapter, I present scholarship on black motherhood that gives an overview of the academic, literary and filmic tradition that has informed the discourses.

Chapter Two began with the relationship between the early academic preoccupations with single motherhood and black family patterns in urban America to the birth control movement. It focuses on the black family research developed by black social scientists E. Franklin Frazier and W. E. B. DuBois and their involvement as leaders in the movement. In the case of Frazier, this project argues that his critique of the role of black mothers being domineering matriarchs in their families lacked a comprehensive investigation of hegemony and control within a patriarchal society. Additionally, counter information is provided that challenges this perspective in literature of African American novelist, Ann Petry.

Chapter Three centers on the growth of the civil rights and black power movements and their relationship to government funded research that essentially caste black mothers and their role as matriarchs as the linchpin of black family failure and black men's academic and economic underdevelopment. Many black men active in the movements adopted this perspective resulting in cross-gender relations becoming strained. In the arts, black women writers countered this perspective by creating plays and literature that gave a more rich analysis of black women's roles in the family.

Chapter Four explores the expansion of black women's studies and the second generation of black feminists who took on previously held demeaning and detrimental assumptions about black mothers and women in general. It was due to the research

developed by these women (and men) that we have a wider range of scholarship by and about black women. Although pernicious stereotypes still persist in many areas of popular culture, there is a counter culture of black women writers and artists that continue to provide us with alternative images and epistemologies.

Motherhood Studies

It is my hope that this project opens the field of Black Women's Studies more broadly. By examining public discourses about black motherhood and black women's response to that discourse, this dissertation makes clear of the long intellectual tradition that has been established by cultural critics and novelists alike that concern black motherhood. By unveiling the public discourses-academic, film and novel-simultaneously, this research makes apparent the impact of even the potentiality of black motherhood on American's attitude about their economic status.¹⁹⁷ Based on those perceptions, programs and public policies that are appreciated by their white counterparts, black mothers were historically shut out of and thus, created their own opportunities to share information about mothering as praxis and intellectual rhetoric.

This project also emphasizes that discourses about black motherhood were not static, although slow changing, they were altered over time. Unfortunately, even when those messages were changed the discourse was still negative and up until recently, void of a black feminists challenge. Black mothers and women in general were cast as the

¹⁹⁷ Nancy Lurkins, "'You are the Race, You are the Seeded Earth: Intellectual Rhetoric, American Fiction, and Birth Control in the Black Community,'" <http://www.eiu.edu/~historia/archives/2008/Historia2008Lurkins.pdf>.

primary “problems” within their families within academic discourse because of their domineering spirits. In films and plays they are more dynamic but this is largely based on whose telling the story. Black women novelists offer us the richest representations of black motherhood by creating characters that challenge the dominant patriarchal and true womanhood discourses that would have one believe that all women (should) desire(d) motherhood.

There were many other texts/arguments concerning race and poverty that I did not offer up for analysis. Most notably, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward’s *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (1993), Michael B. Katz’s *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (1989), and Jill Duerr Berrick’s *Faces of Poverty: Portraits of Women and Children on Welfare* (1995). This project does not provide a closer look at discourses more geared towards race, poverty, welfare, and crime because a major goal of this research is to de-center that approach in examinations of black motherhood and instead, center the women and their contributions. Too often black motherhood discourses begin with an assumed problem, this research does not assume that there is a problem, only a long tradition of black women critiquing, theorizing, creating, establishing, and talking back.¹⁹⁸

Period Comparisons

¹⁹⁸ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*, (New York: Pantheon, 1989); and Jill Duerr Berrick’s *Faces of Poverty: Portraits of Women and Children on Welfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Not surprisingly, until recent history, popular texts and social science texts offered similar perspectives of the African American mothering tradition. In the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and eventual decline of the Great Depression, black family patterns were being seriously studied for the first time by African American social scientists within the academy. This approach, though significant and necessary, discussed the shifting roles of men and women in the family and at times tended to highlight a perceived sexual looseness of both, but especially, women. Ironically, black social scientists were able to capture the various factors of why this might have been the case without intentionally trying to cast black women as harlots or anti-family.

Popular discourses like film also depicted black women as pro-family. So much so that black women were not just concerned with their own families, but almost obsessed with the health and strength of the white family she cared for as a domestic. While this was occurring, black women writers in the early twentieth century constructed mother characters that spoke back to these other discourses that attempted to strip them of agency. Black women fictional writers developed mothers in a way that was at times loving and loyal, but also complicated and torn.

In the 1950s and 1960s social scientists continued to build on the research done by the sociologists before them, however; the difference now was the caricature of black women was more insidious and blatantly pit black men and women against one another. The perceived loyalty that black mother figures of the earlier generation showered onto white families was no longer popular due to the tense racial relationships spurred on by violent racism and fought by activists in the Civil Rights Movement. In film, images of

black women continued to change slowly, but Lorraine Hansberry's Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun*, further complicated the image of the black mother by imbuing her with intelligence and goals for her own family, this was very different from the self-sacrificing images seen just a few short years before. Again, much of the change in popular discourse that one did see as it concerned black women and mothers was because black women, due to the Black Arts Movement, were publishing in great numbers. Thus, black fiction by and about black women continued to be the site of richly drawn black female characters.

The post-industrial age of the mid-1970s to 1990s was an exciting time in the shaping of black female identity in public discourses because of the influx of black women scholars joining the academy. Although popular texts continued to depict black women and mothers as financial drains giving birth to future criminals, these images would not without a challenge from black women intellectuals operating throughout the academic sphere as historians, economists, and cultural critics. On the silver screen, roles for black women both challenged and reinforced old stereotypes. In Blaxploitation films like *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*, black women were fierce but highly sexual, in *Claudine*, the lead character was astute in matters concerning the financial health of her family, but still romantically gullible resulting in six children from various relationships. However, the literature published by black women would continue to flesh out tensions between the personal and political in works by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde and many others.

What's to Follow

Due to limited space all matters concerning black motherhood could not be handled in the project, but future research needs to include a look at public discourses surrounding black fatherhood and explore what messages are being disseminated to men. Although this dissertation proves that those messages are different because of gender and black fatherhood has its own troubling discursive histories, how difficult is it for male feminists to not buy into patriarchal norms? I did not go into great depth about the men and women within these discourses who struggled together on the same side, but there is a history of that as well. Not all black men bought into or perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes, they were instead, eager to share parenting responsibilities. This history needs to be documented.

Additionally, this project, like other recent black feminists scholarship hopes to further strengthen our reliance on nineteenth and early twentieth century black feminist's discourse that exists outside of the academy. The speeches, journal entries, societies and other archival documents are the only evidence we have of early black women's intellectual thought on motherhood at this time; thus, the next phase of the project will provide more current discourses developed by black mothers/women that further challenge our reliance on (male) scholars, white or black, that only offer a recycled approach that posits (poor) black mothers/families are a problem in society. Lastly, the long tradition of black women's discourse on motherhood will continue to offer us alternative sites for theorizing.

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