

When Momma Speaks

*The Bible and Motherhood
from a Womanist Perspective*

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Introduction

I was speaking at another Women's Day celebration. I say "another" not because I had grown accustomed or tired of this type of engagement but because of sheer gratitude that another church asked me to help honor the labor, love, and spirit that is woman. After preaching, I spent time hugging and shaking hands here and there. There was indeed a rich spirit in the room. The attendees were very complimentary and expressed appreciation for my participation.

As I was about to leave, one of the program's co-chairpersons approached me. She boldly declared, "You have written a lot of material. Your bio is quite impressive." I shyly thanked her and proceeded to walk away because I thought the pause indicated the end of the conversation. She continued, "I was wondering what resource do you have for single mothers? There are a large number of mothers, especially young ones, who need some help, some guidance."

I was floored. I had traveled across the United States preaching, lecturing, and giving workshops; but it was not until this woman's comment that I realized the hole in my scholarship. From an academic stance, I had often discussed the role of social location and identity. I even scheduled classes and meetings around my identity as a mother so that, if at all possible, I would not miss one of my son's parent-teacher conferences or sports events. I had toyed with my personhood as a mother in the university's hallowed halls. I had juggled my who-ness as a mom and professor on innumerable occasions. However, I had not put the two-ness of motherhood and academician together in written form. It was not until after what I thought was "another" preaching opportunity that my scholarship had an anagnorisis, an academic aha-moment.

I needed to combine my way of thinking about the Bible and how I get meaning from it with my social identity as a mother, professor, wife, scholar, and preacher. I could no longer speak, get my check, and leave. Mothers longed for me to use my gifts in the academy and the church to help "make it plain," "make motherhood plain." Women

had to have more. The metes and bounds of my vocation in the academy and in the church called for more. What better way to give this more than to write afresh, write something, write more.

Hence, I began playing with the idea of womanist maternal thought. I first noticed “womanist” while reading Alice Walker’s book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden*.¹ Whereas she includes an extensive definition of the term, what struck me was the line “loves herself.”² I did love who I was as a preacher, teacher, and author. I definitely loved who I was as a mother; and, thanks to a conversation with another woman, my scholarship would reflect this.

Yet this brief exchange after a local church event was not the only watershed moment in my writing and thinking. The following experience also served to redirect my publishing and what I was to share with women who balance two professions: motherhood and career.

I was sitting in a room full of mothers. At first glance the gathering was not unusual. Yet I was also in a room full of African American biblical scholars. This was our first such gathering at the Society of Biblical Literature, or SBL. This is a professional organization primarily comprising individuals who teach Old Testament (sometimes called Hebrew Bible) and New Testament biblical studies in colleges, universities, seminaries, and divinity schools. Whereas we knew of each other and had engaged one another’s work in our respective courses, we had not officially gathered until that November evening in 2008 in a Boston hotel.

As we introduced ourselves and our areas of specialty, I was stunned to learn how many of us had children. Of the approximately thirty women in the room, more than half shared something about being a mother. We were not ashamed of our parental roles, but the academic arena was and still is not hospitable. “The firm is ambivalent towards family.” Our fellowship in itself was novel and cause for much celebration. This was the first gathering of African American female professors of biblical studies at the SBL. The Society itself is predominately white and male. Moreover, the revelation of our duties outside the hallowed halls of academia spurred additional jubilation. In a sense of communal affirmation, we learned that we answered to more than just “Professor,”

1. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1983).

2. *Ibid.*, xii. Some elements of Walker’s definition of “womanist” that are relevant to this work include “from womanism; a black feminist or feminist of color; acting womanish; interested in grown-up doings; appreciates and prefers women’s culture, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people; loves struggle; loves Folk; loves herself.”

“Dr.,” or “Ms.” We had heard and responded to the clarion call of “Mommy,” “Mom,” and, in some cases, “Grandma.”

It is out of this “double consciousness”³ that so many African American female scholars in general have had to survive. We have had to remain hush-hush about children and families. It is humorous, or not, that many of our children have academic birthdays because we planned our pregnancies or adoptions around the institutional calendar. Any number of us have children born in May or June so as not to interfere with our school’s exams and/or graduation dates. Yes, we bring our families to professional meetings; however, there is still limited discussion of the intersection of family and career. It was not until 2011 that I noticed the Society of Biblical Literature offering childcare. In the same year there was at least one session on mothering.

As mother scholars or want-to-be mother scholars, we cannot overlook the “off the record” questions at job interviews about family or plans for children. Many pretenure females hear a “hint” or outright warning to wait to have children until after they have completed this matriculation process. Issues of maternity leave, timing, and class coverage are the elephant in the academic room. Therein is the use of the term “mother scholars” and not scholarly mothers.

Latina, Asian, African, and Caucasian female professionals endure the same struggles. However, I am not speaking for them or for all mothers in the African diaspora. I write from only my own social location and experiences as an African American New Testament scholar who on one day submitted a final dissertation draft and literally give birth again the very next day. Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of what it means to be a mother within an African American context. It examines the images of motherhood from various contexts: African, African American chattel slavery, “mammy” in the Reconstruction era, unsung mothers of the civil rights movement, godmother/play mothers, “baby mama” drama, teen mothers, stay-at-home mothers, the Mocha Moms network, pastor/preacher mothers, and mothering in politics.

There has been a close-knit relationship and perhaps convergence of my identity as academic and mother since I first entered the academy over twenty years ago. It is out of this ontology that I have come to wrestle with the idea of womanist maternal thinking.⁴ Although

3. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor Publishing, 2008), 12. Originally published in 1903.

4. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, “Biblical/African American Mother Working/Wrecking,” *Semeia Studies* 61 (November 2009):157–67.

my interest in African American women scholars and motherhood resurfaced in 2008, I first coined the phrase “womanist maternal thinking” in 2006 when presenting at the Southeastern Conference on the Study of Religion (SECSOR) meeting. Here I discussed the meaning of the Canaanite mother’s work as advocacy and a representation of African American mothers’ labor.

I will pursue womanist maternal thinking in chapter 2, where I expound on this new area of study: that is, womanist maternal hermeneutics. By defining “womanism” as a field of study that seeks to interpret simultaneously African American women’s and the African American community’s experience in the context of theology or God-talk and “motherhood” as advocacy and activity that women initiate to bring wholeness and health to children, the chapter shows how this new field of study is different from feminist maternal theology and why this approach fills a void in women’s studies. This chapter pays particular attention to the relevance of womanist maternal thinking for African American mothers in the United States.

Under the rubric of womanist biblical hermeneutics, chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which African American women tend to read and interpret biblical texts in light of their own experiences. Additionally this chapter outlines the metes and bounds of womanist biblical studies as an approach rooted in the ways that the bible informs African American women’s lives and their understanding of faith. The chapter explains how this model of interpretation encompasses the manner in which African American women’s experiences affect their reading of the Bible.

Womanist biblical interpretation as the theoretical framework for chapters 4 through 8 becomes the exegetical lens to sample biblical mothers from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Chapter 4 examines the surrogacy of Hagar. She is a homeless, displaced mother whose role as a substitute mother backfires. Hagar’s story serves as the impetus for addressing women and children living in shelters while expounding on modern-day surrogacy.

Chapter 5 recounts the story of Rizpah. She does not relinquish her motherly duties even after her children die: she continues to guard their bodies from further harm. Furthermore, she renders the same degree of attention to another mother’s children. This chapter also addresses the current context of mothers who have lost children to violence, war, early death, and “dead” situations of children on drugs, in prison, in gangs, or just living dangerously.

Chapter 6 examines Bathsheba as a fearless mother. Despite her “past” with David, she confronts him on his deathbed regarding his promise to make Solomon the next king. Bathsheba is a woman who boldly plays a man’s game. This chapter expounds on African American mothers trying to survive in a “man’s” corporate world.

I chose the mothers from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament because they are women who were subjects of sermons I preached over the years. Their stories had not been told from this interpretive perspective. Honestly, I have not heard any sermon on Rizpah, and there was little research on her. The novelty and the fact that much of this approach was uncharted territory appealed to me.

Chapter 7 presents a divergent view of Mary the mother of Jesus. An angel says God favors Mary, but Mary initially rejects this favor and is therefore favorless. She is uncomfortable with God’s promise and insecure in the future. This chapter discusses Mary as a teen and leads into an exploration of the state of teenage mothers and stigmas surrounding them. It also seeks to delineate the ideas that mothers are sometimes uncertain about what to do, and that is OK; motherhood can be clouded with personal insecurity, social stigma, and financial instability.

The Canaanite mother is the subject of chapter 8. She is relentless in that she does not stop seeking Jesus despite his and the disciples’ attempts to send her away. She endures harsh language and circumstances for the sake of her child’s healing. This chapter will include discussion of women who go to extreme lengths to advocate for children, women whom society labels as “other” due to race, and women who engage institutional powers for the good of the children.

The image of one negotiating a place of honor for her sons describes the mother of James and John in chapter 9. She makes a bold request filled with effrontery. As a mother she goes straight to Jesus and seeks places of prestige for her children. Her concern is for the social mobility of her children. This chapter explores the current context of maternal materialism and the pressure for children to succeed in cases of the mother’s lack of success. It explores how mothers live vicariously through their children.

I chose these New Testament mothers because I have also preached sermons about them. Additionally, like the women from the first testament, few scholars, if any, narrate their stories with this particular sociological, political, and theological lens. Their actions and responses to Jesus or God’s agent are compelling and out of the box.

Chapter 10 concludes the book by reviewing main ideas and offering maternal tentacles for the future. There are many biblical mothers not addressed in this book. Also as situations regarding current-day mothers are constantly changing, the final chapter offers some preliminary points of departure for future research.

Study questions are included in each chapter to facilitate both personal and communal reflection and, yes, action.

Needless to say, this book has been a long time coming. It is the culmination of years of wrestling with aspects of my identity and trying to find some way to teach, write, and preach myself through the dissonance. This project is also meant to be communal. As previously stated, almost half the biblical scholars laughing, talking, and, yes, crying on that cold evening in Boston were mothers. So many since that time have become mothers. I want this book to be a resource so that my sisters in the academy will not suffer in silence or become voiceless victims. The academy does not have the right to dictate what we do with our bodies inside or outside of the academy.

As the question that prompted these ruminations emanated from a church setting, I want this book to ultimately be a guide, handbook, how-to manual, a reflection resource for women who will never step foot in a seminary or divinity school or who may not have gone to college. I want to be able to point women and men to a work that examines African American motherhood from a biblical perspective. This work is meant to be practical in nature and go beyond thought and meditation. Yes, one must think and analyze one's actions in order to change. Nonetheless, as a tool of praxis, the purpose of this book is to give African American mother steps, tidbits to developing and enriching the ministry that is called "Mom," "Momma," or "Ma-Dear."

I seek to foster change of behavior and habits within African American women who as mothers, by any definition, have the privilege of nurturing the next generation of girls and boys. For a mother of any racial or ethnic background, this work seeks to shed light on mothers in the Bible whose stories in some way resonate with their lives. As mothers there are certain expectations and demands society places on us. This role sometimes poses challenges to our additional professional obligations. Yet, as mommas, we dare not put anything or anyone before our children. We dare to risk it all for another hug, another kiss, or attendance at baby boy's or baby girl's events. We take extreme strides to salvage who we are as "momma."

Whether you read it entirely from beginning to end, study it with

a small group, or select specific chapters that meet you where you are, this book seeks to help you traverse this journey called motherhood. Sometimes the road is rocky and replete with lions and tigers and bears. There are moments when there is a clear, maternal path. Whoever you are, wherever you are in life, it is my design that what is written in these pages will offer helpful hints and lessons learned as we mothers discover and embrace the strength that oft lies dormant. Ours is a powerful voice even in the stillest moments. It is a voice that will not give way to hatred or injustice. In a mother's tongue is a child's future, a community's rallying cry. Recall this book project came to being after I was speaking to another woman following a preaching engagement. The sacred, self, and society lend an ear and stir into action—when Momma speaks!

PART ONE

Setting the Stage

1

Being an African American Mother

We need mothers who are capable of being character builders, patient, loving, strong and true, whose homes will be uplifting power in the race. This is one of the greatest needs of the hour.

—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “Enlightened Motherhood,” 1892

This is not your mother’s idea of motherhood. Society no longer views the maternal through the eyes of Florida Evans from *Good Times*, Carole Brady from *The Brady Bunch*, or Mrs. Cleaver from *Leave It to Beaver*.¹ Hollywood has made being a mommy as hot as haute couture. Images of Halle Berry, Beyoncé, Angela Bassett, Tyra Banks, and even rapper Lil’ Kim seek to add glitz and glamor to the maternal world. Mega-producer and self-proclaimed titan, Shonda Rhimes has added to the motherhood conversation in her recent book and TED Talk. She maintains saying “yes” to play makes for better work.² Mothers throughout the United States watched the first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama. From the time she first appeared on the campaign trail in 2007 and throughout the Obama family’s White House days, women wanted to know how this Mom-in-Chief was nurturing her daughters, Sasha and Malia. Surely she would be the ultimate, übermom. Yes, the images of the maternal have shifted from aprons and kitchens to designer bags and boardrooms. Mommies rock!

Yet whereas these are modern-day presentations of motherhood, time will not forget the plethora of nameless so-called mummies and

1. *Good Times*, *The Brady Bunch* and *Leave It to Beaver* were sitcoms during the 1970s. *Good Times* featured a poor black family living in Chicago whereas *The Brady Bunch* and *Leave It to Beaver* centered around middle-class white families living in the suburbs. In all three shows, the mother was a stay-at-home domestic figure primarily responsible for running the household.

2. Shonda Rhimes, “My Year of Saying Yes to Everything,” TED Talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/shonda_rhimes_my_year_of_saying_yes_to_everything?language=en.

matriarchs. There are those who during slavery and the Reconstruction nursed not only their children, but “massah’s” children as well. These were hardworking, burden-bearing, heavy-load carrying foremothers who from sunup to sundown worked in the fields only to go home and provide for their own sons and daughters. It was only after they took care of somebody’s child that they could focus on being mother to their own. The field or the domestic job called them first.

At the cusp of the twentieth century, society stood in need of the work only a mother could do. The quote from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper alludes to this. The nurturing, maternal presence of a woman was the order of the day then. There is still a clarion call for such labor now. If indeed the work of mothers is that of character building, it is also the construction of stately, human edifices who will change the landscape of the environment.

Children spend hours upon hours at school and days and weeks at camp. In these places they encounter peers whose ways of thinking, doing, and believing are different from their own. Such distinctions are primarily due to different parents teaching their children in different ways at different times. So much of this teaching comes from a maternal figure. Thus there comes to the forefront the need for mothers in the home where children can learn sociological and spiritual values that will undergird them for life. Training in the home must combat what goes on outside of its environs. Along with primarily overseeing the domestic responsibilities of the house, mothers tend to be the principle teachers and nurturers.

The operative words are “primarily” and “tend.” It is no doubt that many children do not live in a two-parent household. Quite a few children reside with only a father and no maternal figure. Almost two million men are single fathers, and 16 percent of custodial single parents are men.³ In addition there are conditions in households where the mother is the breadwinner and the onus of dishes, bills, and homework lies with the dad. An estimated 195,000 men are stay-at-home dads who have remained out of the labor force for at least a year so that they can care for the family while their wives work outside the home.⁴ Thus there is no one-size-fits-all approach to what it means to be a mother, especially in an African American context. In many ways there is no norm. To each household its “motherly” own.

3. “Dad Stats,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.fatherhood.gov/content/dad-stats>.

4. *Ibid.*

In addition, biological mothering does not mean that a woman is adept at motherhood. There is no magical, maternal gene that gets turned on because a woman gives birth or adopts a child. Motherhood is a process. It is a journey. It may or may not begin with desire, but a part of becoming a mother is perchance growing into this state of being.

There, I said it. This idea of motherhood is not monolithic. It is not universal. There are some “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts” that make the definition and its task nebulous at best. Nonetheless, what this research tries to do is show that there are some common ideas and tenets about maternal existence. There are aspects of motherhood that are indeed universal and warrant further investigation.

This labor of “character building,” as Harper calls it, has not always been easy for women of African descent. Whereas the independence in some African countries allowed mothers to rule, love, and nurture at will, the crisis of the Middle Passage and subsequent slave trade made this task arduous and painful at best.

Understanding motherhood within an African American context lends to some examination of its origin in West African cultures. Because Africans that were brought to America primarily came from West Africa, viewing maternity through this lens is a beginning. Scholars differ on whether West African ideas on motherhood were reconstituted in America or left behind altogether. Frazier argues that due to slavery, “there was no social organization to sustain whatever conceptions of life the Negro might have retained of his African heritage.”⁵ On the contrary, Herskovits maintains that there is the “presence of Africanisms in black family life and in various other aspects of black culture.”⁶ While they differ about origin, both arguments assert that the focus on consanguinity versus conjugality as approaches to family are at the core of the African versus Western family foundation. Consanguinity is the focus on bloodties that connect the family whereas a conjugality is based on legal procedures that bring people together as family i.e. marriage. African family structures hold to the idea of bloodlines as a means of creating community and commonality counter to Western ideas that tend to value marriage as a means of unifying people.

The arguments of Herskovits and Frazier have limits as well as

5. Niara Sudarkasa, “Roots of the African American Family: Observations on the Frazier-Herskovits Debate,” in *The Strength of Our Mothers: African and African American Women and Families* (Trenton: Africa World, 1996), 81.
6. *Ibid.*

advantages. Yet neither discounts the role of mother in elements of West African culture and its presence in America. In some West African countries, matrilineality serves as a means for determining the allocation of land, titles, and other properties among their mothers. In such societies, a woman's children belong to the lineage of the mother. Children of the same mother belong to the same matrilineage regardless of paternity.⁷ Relationships are linked through the descent of the mother-line. It is the consanguineal connection or bloodline that forms the core of the community's relationship and serves as the root of the extended family. The matrilineal ties include not only living family members but also the ancestors of the mother.

Even in cases of a patrilineal structure where ancestry is rooted in the father, the mothers still have a significant role that in some cases can transcend the role of their husbands. This is primarily due to family lineage rooted in the wives. They help to tie one family to another family, thus extending the bonds of not only one family but two. If a particular community practices polygamy, then there are even more connectors among various family groups. Another distinction between patrilineal and matrilineal frameworks is that the males in matrilineal societies cannot occupy the roles that are strictly analogous to those of females in patrilineal societies. If for no other reason, it is the women in both instances who bear the children.⁸

Although not the norm in West African cultures, matrilineality in this context provides a means for scrutinizing the strong female presence in chattel slavery. While acknowledging West African tribes organized around matrilineal culture, Sudarkasa presents a different view on African American households during slavery. She maintains that "Even though these female-headed houses were not African in origin, an understanding of the importance of consanguinity in African kinship helps to explain why they persisted among black Americans as an alternative form of household organization."⁹ Perchance it is that African motherhood in America was and is a recontextualized survival tactic of women, particularly mothers, who had to adjust to oppressed status as chattel slaves.

7. *Ibid.*, 92.

8. *Ibid.*, 97.

9. *Ibid.*, 85.

FROM MATRILINEAL TO MAMMY

A change in environment produced a redefinition of communal structure and operation. Whereas mother as the center of family life and well-being in a West African context was something of value, this practice quickly gave way to an idea of woman as commodity and mother as supplier of the slave labor. The brutal conditions of slavery provided little room for the affective sentiment rooted in maternity. Because women's bodies were sources of capitalistic exploitation, motherhood until the 1860s was a means to finance plantation labor. Sex at the pleasure of the slave master not only soothed his egregious desires but also provided the seed to tend to his fields. Ironically, sex under such circumstances made African women on American ground more asexualized. Biologically women were mothers as they gave birth, but there was no respect for the "maternal" gift they could offer their children. Women as mothers were breeders. Children of the mothers mere field hands in the making.

Slavery limited African American women's marriage opportunities, citizenship, and humanity. There was little to no social context for issues of privatized motherhood. Children came through the loins of their mothers but did not belong to them. Slavery as a social and political milieu harnessed African American women's sexuality and fertility.¹⁰ By redefining African American women as nonsexual beings and subsequently nullifying the humanity of children produced from sexual encounters with them, slavery uprooted what had been some West African ideas of the mother as the central force in tribe or nation building. Since the worth of women rested not in their maternal duties but in the fiscal possibilities, plantation life served to destroy communal mothering practices and accountability. By forcing women to focus on surviving rape while trying, without much success, to keep and to nurture their children, slavery took motherhood from being a social staple of the African community and made it a reflection of individualism at the hands of monetary gain.

Nonetheless the image of "mammy" as the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class emanated from the recontextualization of motherhood from a West African to enslaved American environment. The notion of a happy female slave who delighted in childbearing and child-rearing was the social and political product of an asexualized

10. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 50.

African woman on American soil. Conversely, mammy became a type of mother figure in a context where the responsibilities of mother were inconsequential. Yes, biologically enslaved women carried the label of “mother”; however, the familial duties were secondary to their duties as producers of field hands. She had no time to love her daughters or sons, and she did not need to be loved.¹¹

The lack of attention women on plantations were to give their own children became the foundation for the development of the iconic mammy figure. This public face represented to whites what it meant to be a good female slave. Mammy as a happy, dark-skinned, heavy, and healthy-looking figure became the epitome of the mother who took care of the master’s seed. There was no association with nurturing her own children. Her delight was in caring for the owner’s house and all who dwelled in it. Mammy was the surrogate mother in African American face and was to be the model for other women of African descent.¹²

These views of mammy were not general. To African Americans she smiled but was cunning and prone to poison the masters. Whites for the most part perceived her as the bubbly servant aiming to please her owners.¹³ Yet in both frameworks, mammy was still not a sexual being. Her social roles superseded her physical appeal. W. E. B. DuBois further applied a christological metaphor in describing her. He maintained: “Above all looms the figure of the Black Mammy, one of the most pitiful of the world’s Christs.”¹⁴ Mammy epitomized the mind versus body, culture versus nature, dichotomy that would distinguish her from other African American enslaved women. While on the same continuum as a more youthful, light-skinned childbearing slave, mammy became the fulfillment of what a loyal, oppressed woman should be: the blissful, asexual mother to children not her own.

Post slavery the association of mammy with master’s house provided impetus for the economic exploitation of freed African American women. Although no longer on plantations, women of African heritage from the 1860s to the 1960s were still the face of domestic workers in white homes. In the 1920s alone, four-fifths of African American female wage earners not in agriculture were maids, cooks, or washerwomen. From 1890 to 1920, 90 percent of clerical and professional

11. Patricia Dixon, *African American Relationships, Marriages, and Families: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 71.

12. *Ibid.*, 73.

13. *Ibid.*

14. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Gift of Black Folk: Negroes in the Making of America* (New York: Square One Publishers, 2009), 159.

positions went to white women.¹⁵ African American women fit in one category, that of the house servant. They were “the help” who spent their days tending to the needs of others, sometimes incessantly at the expense of their own maternal duties.

Akin to traditional mammy, the modern-day mammy in the form of Tyler Perry’s “Madea,” Martin Lawrence’s “Big Momma,” and even Rickey Smiley’s “Sister Bernice” are large, manly, primarily asexual beings. They are the caregivers who show little if no interest in their appearance. Their principal concern is ensuring the needs of those who “lord it over them” are met.

These current mammy images may be visible in the ways African American women in the corporate world find themselves “cleaning” up administrative and fiduciary mess. There are innumerable occasions in which African American women find themselves the head of a business only to realize that the house is not in order. The need to smile, grin, and put on a happy face can be the pain of educated women now in charge of the master’s messy, executive house.

Women of African descent came from a familial tradition where mother-centered authority was the core of tribal life. Yet slavery sought to uproot this matrilineal focus by shifting maternal roles to that of merely breeding. This emphasis on “production” laid the groundwork for viewing enslaved women as biological machines and helped to spur the caricature of the mammy figure as an asexualized, disengaged maternal figure. She neglected her own for the sake of the white other. The relegation of women to the “big house” soon stapled freed African American women to the role of domestic ad infinitum. Mammy developed into a more overbearing image of African American motherhood, the aggressive matriarch.

OF MATRIARCHS AND OTHER MOTHERS

Dixon declares that what mammy was to white homes, the matriarch figure was to African American homes. However, while mammy was the docile domestic, the matriarch was nothing short of domineering, castrating, and wielding.¹⁶ If mammy was dependent, then the

15. Sara Kugler, “What Does Women’s Liberation Look Like?” <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/day-9what-does-womens-liberation-look>.

16. Dixon, *African American Relationships, Marriages, and Families*, 71.

matriarch was the essence of too much independence. The African American matriarch represented a failed mammy, negative stigma.¹⁷ The Moynihan Report of 1965 rubber stamps this view, declaring that the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.¹⁸

This “matriarchal structure” played out in several scenarios. It included families where the primary breadwinner was the mother even if the father was present and working. In some cases the father lived in the home but did not work. Some matriarchal family units centered around a single mother who was the sole economic and authority figure in the house. Moynihan’s pejorative and skewed view presents the Negro matriarchal family in the 1960s as a problem and source of economic depravity. His sociological analysis was not the overarching perspective. It all depended on who was and who is telling the black woman’s story.

Researchers like Patricia Hill Collins confirm that before the 1960s the black community had a higher percentage of families with single mothers at the helm. Yet she maintains that this structure was in no way connected to poverty or issues related to welfare dependence. It was not until feminist protests and black political activism did the equation of single mothers with being poor come into the public square. If anything, black matriarchs in whatever familial context were strong women learning to survive under harsh conditions.¹⁹ Ironically the percentage of such families was just 22 percent compared to 8 percent or so margin in white families.²⁰ The numbers would increase over the decades as more African American men faced income and economic disparities, thus compelling African American women to join the labor force.

Thus the emergence of the African American matriarch as the so-called overworked, bad mother who neglected her children was due primarily to African American men’s limited access to economic opportunities. Capitalistic and government social policies created a climate of duress for African American men. African American women paid the demonizing price for doing whatever was necessary to solidify the African American family unit.

17. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 75.

18. Patrick Moynihan, U.S. Department of Labor, “The Tangle of Pathology,” <http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/moynchapter4.htm>.

19. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 75.

20. *Ibid.*

Sociologists further note that confusion over terms such as “household” and “family” is also the root of misunderstanding matriarchy. Whereas “households” consist of individuals sharing a common dwelling, a “family” might include kin living outside the household. Additionally, lack of clarity regarding matriarchal versus matrifocal family also lends to misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Matrifocal refers to mother/woman centeredness against the supposed dominance over males as implied in the term “matriarchal.” Dominance is not a precondition for a matrifocal family unit.²¹

In a relationship twist, some would avow that the African American matriarch is even judged by African American men because she refuses to let others help her and has a “pull myself up by my own bootstrap” mentality.²² Despite what may be perceived challenges to marriage and relationships with men in general, there has been little to discount the length the matriarch will go for the sake of her children. The literature of writers like Lorraine Hansberry is among the various works that redeem the prevailing negative stereotypes. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the matriarch, Lena Younger, dares to move her African American family into an unwelcoming white neighborhood. Hansberry does not paint Mrs. Younger as a matriarch who degrades or emasculates men. Despite family challenges, she takes her plant and moves the family one step closer to a dream fulfilled. This is classic matriarchal strength and might.

One overlooked aspect of the matriarchal image is the relationship with other matriarchs or mothers who are the heads of households. Mother-to-mother dependence is another element of African American motherhood. Whereas these women work hard for the money outside of the home, they also lean on each other to share childcare responsibilities. The concept of “other mothering” is a component in the African American maternal tradition.

Women taking care of each other’s children helped to establish a form of extended family. If formal childcare is not available or too costly, one mother substitutes for another. Other mothering means that the level of respect and honor a child gives to her or his biological mother is due the neighbor, cousin, aunt, or family friend taking care of the child. In the same vein, this secondary mother has the right to

21. Bette Dickerson, *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995), xiii.

22. Kimberly Foster, “The Continuance of African American Women Stereotypes,” <http://www.forharriet.com/2010/06/continuance-of-black-women-stereotypes.html#axzz44QCt1BX7>.

discipline the “son” or “daughter” as she would her own. Such reciprocity promotes a sense of communal responsibility that cross-connects mothers and children. If a child misbehaves, it is not unusual to suffer the wrath of both a community and a biological mother. Although this level of motherly accountability may not be as prevalent today, in some communities African American women still depend on each other to pick up children before and after school, carpool to a practice or game, provide a meal here and there, and just serve as an additional family member and supporter.

Other mothering also manifests in conditions where grandmothers must care for a daughter’s or son’s children either by choice or by default. Grandmothers thus take on the role not as “Granny,” but as second “Momma.” If the parent is working, it is not uncommon for “Granny” or “Nana” to be responsible for other mothering in the interim. Much harsher circumstances such as incarceration or drug addiction quickly conscript grandmother or grandparents into the role of primary caregiver. To preclude children entering foster care system, maternal and in some cases paternal mothers bear the onus of rearing boys and girls.

Teen mothering, although technically not in the other mothering category, does open the door for a variation of it. Most teenage mothers are not old enough to live by themselves. Many are minors whose mothers or some guardian are responsible for their care. As a teenaged mother tries to provide for a child, she herself is also a child in need of nurture and guidance. Thus the grandmother or guardian of the teen’s baby can easily find herself or himself being responsible for the baby and the mother of the baby. Thus, there is a coupling aspect to other mothering.

Whereas teen birth rates are higher among Hispanic and African American adolescent females (respectively 46.3 and 43.9 births per 1,000), one must note that the national teen pregnancy rate has declined over the last two decades.²³ Studies cite a higher percentage of teens are postponing sexual intercourse, with contraception, socioeconomic status, and family structure (presence of both parents) as guiding factors.²⁴ Conversely it is also a different understanding of family struc-

23. The Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, “Trends in Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing,” <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/reproductive-health/teen-pregnancy/trends.html#.U6ygsSjxp74>.

24. Cheryl Wetzstein, “Study Finds Teens Postponing Sex, Using Birth Control More,” *The Washington Times*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/12/study-teens-postpone-sex-using-birth-control-more/?page=all>.

ture that demonstrates the measures people take to help adolescents who give birth. Family relationships may include multiple generations including the roles of grandparents and great-grandparents. Extended family members are also critical in providing a context to foster successful outcomes for the teens and their offspring.

No one doubts that there is some level of disappointment when a family grapples with an unwanted teenage pregnancy. Yet it is not unusual for a rallying of human and financial resources to “make it work.” As families in African American contexts come to terms with the unexpected “I’m expecting” moment, relatives adjust and do what is necessary to prepare for the teen birth. Family relationships play a key role in the lives of pregnant and subsequently parenting teens. Hence the other mothering not only comes to bear after the teenager has given birth, but there is a double, maternal nurturing throughout the pregnancy. Again this presents a different form of other mothering.

Whereas matriarchs and matrifocal families lean toward internal structure and order, other mothering extends the metes and bounds of maternal living. This allows for a more external approach where mothers look beyond their four walls to include children not their own. This broadening of the family provides a foundation for community activist mothers whose work centers on rectifying the social, political, and economic ills that hinder their settings.

COMMUNITY AND CHURCH MOTHERS: VISION MOTHERS

The year 2014 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer. During this time in 1964 young people from across the United States descended on small communities in parts of Mississippi and Alabama to register voters. Leading such groups were women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker who began their work as community organizers. These women among many others were seen as the “community mothers” whose vision for a better, just society propelled teens to join the fight. Theirs was not only the responsibility of securing a political future but also ensuring the physical well-being of young activists in the heat of the battle.

Community mothers may or may not have had biological children of their own. Their “seed” was the many women, men, and children who did not have voices to tell of their own economic plight or social hardship. The progeny of the community mothers includes anyone

who needs an advocate to cry out against racial discrimination and class prejudice. Marching to the beat of Mary Church Terrell, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary MacLeod Bethune, these activist matriarchs yield a clarion call for a new day and a new order. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes, "Community mothers are the guardians of community political traditions. Their ability to function as power brokers stemmed from their leadership within the historical black women's movement and organizations."²⁵

What is unique about the community mothers vis-a-vis "other mothers" and matriarchs is that they vocalized their disagreement with systems and structures during times in which African American women had more education, social opportunities, and more freedom. The likes of Burroughs, Bethune, and Dorothy Height were college graduates. Yet they thought it not beneath them to open doors for those who did not have access to such basic human rights. Whereas it was not uncommon for community mothers at the grassroots level to lack formal education, they wielded a common sense to speak to the ills of the day. Thus community mothers included various prototypes, the educated club women who fought through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Council of Negro Women. Included were women without formal education who still knew the power of door-to-door mobilization. Both levels of community mothers continue their work of advocacy today.

Related to the community mothers are the church mothers who wield their power in sacred space. The mothers outside of the church tend to have more authority than those who dwell in holy places. Environments of patriarchy are the order of the day in many church settings across denominational lines. Baptist, Church of God in Christ, and Methodist traditions are gravid with sexist theologies that limit what women can and cannot do. The church mother embodies that of the caretaker of the "Body of Christ." This is over against the strong arm community mothers have in nurturing and advocating for the "Body of the Community."

Church mothers are expected to provide meals, assist with planning women's events, and cater to the basic needs of the pastor or bishops. Many are often department heads related to Christian education. They oversee the Women's Convention in addition to being core fundraisers and principle tithers. However, male leaders often limit their service

25. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 65.

to these functions. Church mothers are rarely evangelists, preachers, pastors, or bishops. If they are serving in such roles, it is due to self-appointment. Gilkes avers, "These varieties of women's power and position indicate clearly that the role of women in ministry and in the hierarchy of African American churches remained a central and critical debate that often fueled the reorganization of social worlds within the black religious experience."²⁶

Church mothers and community mothers are indeed mothers of vision. This is not to discount the forward thinking of matriarchs and other mothers. Community mothers tend to think beyond their four walls and focus on demolishing systemic edifices constructed with the bricks of racism and the mortar of poverty. Church mothers, through their subversive work, bring to the surface the erroneous mandates that subjugate women in the church to certain degrees and types of ministry. It is through their work that one sees the dangers of female relegation while also glimpsing what an egalitarian, nonsexist sacred space should entail.

The survey of the African American motherhood is vast and profound. Women of African descent have long held in high esteem their role as mother. In tribes in West Africa rooted in matrilineal and even maternal-rule traditions, motherhood rocks! Although the structures of slavery intended to decapitate family structures, mothers in slavery still were able to provide some sense of family order while having to surrender and perform as mother to the master's seed. The strength of such mothers did not dissipate but was a force that would not yield to the dehumanizing caricatures of mammy even in the Reconstruction. Matrifocal and matriarchal family units developed to counter the capitalistic system's means of castrating men, thus precluding them from being an economic force in the family.

Sister bonds among mothers allow for an atmosphere of other mothering. Women today still help to fill in the gap for each other in whatever maternal means is necessary. While many mothers focus on providing a shelter and putting food on the table, the role of community mother is that of helping to guarantee that all mothers have a job and access to education in order to sustain themselves and their families. Community mothers are free and unrestricted, whereas their visionary counterparts of church mothers tend to minister under more burdened and circumscribed conditions. This history of African

26. *Ibid.*, 72.

American motherhood is as diverse as it is complex and as profound as it is organic. Mothers, you rock!

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some modern-day “mammy” images?
2. Is the idea of “matriarch” good, bad, or both? Why?
3. What connections do you see between African and African American mothers?
4. Is the idea of African American women and mothers being responsible for children who are not their own still a prevalent idea? Why or why not?
5. Name some community mothers in your current context. What makes them “community” mothers?