8 BLACK WOMEN AND MOTHERHOOD

Just yesterday I stood for a few minutes at the top of the stairs leading to a white doctor's office in a white neighborhood. I watched one Black woman after another trudge to the corner, where she then waited to catch the bus home. These were Black women still cleaning somebody else's house or Black women still caring for somebody else's sick or elderly, before they came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families. And I felt angry and I felt ashamed. And I felt, once again, the kindling heat of my hope that we, the daughters of these Black women, will honor their sacrifice by giving them thanks. We will undertake, with pride, every transcendent dream of freedom made possible by the humility of their love. —June Jordan 1985, 105

June Jordan's words poignantly express the need for African-American women to honor our mothers' sacrifices by developing self-defined analyses of Black motherhood. Until the growth of modern Black feminism in the 1970s, analyses of Black motherhood were largely the province of men, both White and Black, and male perspectives on Black mothers prevailed. Black mothers were accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of retarding their children's academic achievement (Moynihan 1965). Citing high rates of divorce, female-headed households, and out-of-wedlock births, prevailing scholarship claimed that African-American mothers wielded unnatural power in allegedly deteriorating family structures (Zinn 1989; Dickerson 1995b). The African-American mothers observed by Jordan vanished from these accounts.

Feminist work on motherhood from the 1970s and 1980s produced a limited critique of these views. Reflecting White, middle-class women's angles of vision, feminist analyses typically lacked an adequate race and class analysis

(Collins 1994). Dedicated to demystifying the traditional family ideal, much work from this period confronted prevailing analyses of White, middle-class women's experiences as mothers. Such critiques remained less successful at challenging the controlling images let alone the practices they defended aimed at African-American women. Recognizing that much feminist scholarship from this period failed to include Black mothers "still cleaning somebody else's house or . . . caring for somebody else's sick or elderly," subsequent feminist scholarship by U.S. White women explicitly aimed to address differences among women based on race, class, sexuality, and citizenship status (Andersen 1991; Coontz 1992; Thorne 1992).

Ideas about Black motherhood emanating from African-American communities have been quite different. Historically, the concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the philosophies of people of African descent. In many African-American communities so much sanctification surrounds Black motherhood that "the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm" (Christian 1985, 234). In the context of this historical significance, many African-American thinkers tend to glorify Black motherhood. They refuse to acknowledge the issues faced by Black mothers who "came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families." This mother glorification is especially prominent in the works of U.S. Black men who routinely praise Black mothers, especially their own. However, by claiming that Black women are richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love—the attributes associated with archetypal motherhood—U.S. Black men inadvertently foster a different albeit seemingly positive image for Black women. The controlling image of the "superstrong Black mother" praises Black women's resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers. Yet, in order to remain on their pedestal, these same superstrong Black mothers must continue to place their needs behind those of everyone else, especially their sons. Even Black-nationalist-inspired critical social theory finds it difficult to move beyond images of strong Black mothers working on behalf of the new Black nation. Within Afrocentrism, for example, images persist of "authentic" Black women who hold fast to traditional African-derived values in the context of U.S. racism (Collins 1998a, 167–74).

Stepping out of the realm of Black discourse reveals that far too many Black men who praise their own mothers feel less accountable to the mothers of their daughters and sons. They allow their wives and girlfriends to support the growing numbers of African-American children living in poverty (Nightingale 1993, 16–22). Despite the alarming deterioration of economic and social supports for U.S. Black mothers, large numbers of young men hold fast to myths of Black male hypersexuality and encourage their unmarried teenage girlfriends to give birth to children whose futures are at risk (Ladner 1972; Ladner and Gourdine 1984). Even when they are aware of the poverty and struggles these women face, many Black men cannot get beyond powerful controlling images of matriarchs

and superstrong Black mothers. As Michele Wallace points out, many African-American men fail to see the very real costs of mothering to African-American women:

> I remember once I was watching a news show with a black male friend of mine who had a Ph.D. in psychology and was the director of an outpatient clinic. We were looking at some footage of a black woman. . . . She was in bed wrapped in blankets, her numerous small, poorly clothed children huddled around her. Her apartment looked rat-infested, cramped, and dirty. She had not, she said, had heat and hot water for days. My friend, a solid member of the middle class now but surely no stranger to poverty in his childhood, felt obliged to comment . . . "That's a *strong* sister," as he bowed his head in reverence. (1978, 108–109)

In this overall context, the patterns of emphasis and omission characterizing Black feminist analyses of motherhood are not particularly surprising. Several factors within Black civil society contribute to these patterns. One reflects the self-imposed restrictions that accompany norms of racial solidarity. In a context of institutionalized racism where African-Americans have long aimed to present a united front to Whites, many U.S. Blacks learn to police one another (Lubiano 1997). Internal dissent is especially frowned upon when it comes to motherhood, the seeming core of family, culture, and community. Another factor concerns African-American women's reluctance to challenge African-American men *in public*. The vehement attacks sustained by Michele Wallace, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and other Black feminist scholars accused of attacking Black men served as a lesson to others that speaking out can bring painful censure (see, for example, Staples 1979). As Anita Hill found out, whether true or not, criticisms aimed at a Black man in public are frowned upon by many African-Americans. For many U.S. Black women, much silence emanates from efforts to support Black men's well-intentioned efforts to defend and protect Black womanhood. Glorifying the strong Black mother represents Black men's attempts to replace negative White male interpretations with positive Black male ones.

Another set of factors influencing Black women's relative silences concerns the perceived Whiteness of U.S. feminism. Unfortunately, while feminism remains one of the few discourses advancing important analyses of motherhood, the combination of its perceived Whiteness and antifamily politics limits its effectiveness. In the context of a racially segregated society where White women historically and currently benefit from Black women's subordination, African-American women who remain suspicious of feminism are being neither unreasonable nor demonstrating a lack of feminist consciousness. Moreover, when combined with the perception of feminism as being antifamily and, by implication, antimotherhood, U.S. Black women's collective reluctance to advance critical analyses of Black motherhood becomes even more understandable.

No matter how sincere, externally defined definitions of Black woman-

hood—even those offered by sympathetic African-American men or well-meaning White feminists—are bound to come with their own set of problems. In the case of Black motherhood, the problems have been a stifling of dialogue among African-American women and the perpetuation of troublesome, controlling images, both negative and positive. As Renita Weems observes: "We have simply sat and nodded while others talked about the magnificent women who bore and raised them and who, along with God, made a way out of no way. . . . We paid to hear them lecture about the invincible strength and genius of the Black mother, knowing full well that the image can be as bogus as the one of the happy slave" (1984, 27). In general, African-American women need a revitalized Black feminist analysis of motherhood that debunks the image of "happy slave," whether the White-male-created "matriarch" or the Black-male-perpetuated "superstrong Black mother."

A Black Women's Standpoint on Mothering

The institution of Black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self. These relationships occur in specific locations such as the individual households that make up African-American extended family networks, as well as in Black community institutions (Martin and Martin 1978; Sudarkasa 1981b). Moreover, just as U.S. 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.

Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical. Ongoing tensions characterize efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation and efforts by African-American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood. The controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother and the practices they justify are designed to oppress. In the context of a sexual politics that aims to control Black women's sexuality and fertility, African-American women struggle to be good mothers. In contrast, motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism. These alleged contradictions can exist side by side in African-

American communities and families and even within individual women.

Embedded in these changing relationships are five enduring themes that have characterized and, for many African-American women, continue to characterize a Black women's standpoint on Black motherhood. For any given historical moment, the particular form that Black women's relationships with one another, children, community, and self actually take depends on how this dialectical relationship between the severity of oppression facing African-American women and our actions in resisting that oppression is expressed. Despite the shared thematic content of this Black women's standpoint, considerable heterogeneity concerning its expression has always existed. It is in many ways easier to see the contours of a Black women's standpoint on motherhood in the pre–World War II era. The five enduring themes described below emerged in the context of and were sustained by specific social conditions associated with slavery, Southern rural life, and class-stratified, racially segregated neighborhoods of earlier periods of urban Black migration. These conditions fostered the appearance of a distinctive Black women's standpoint on mothering and gave clear reasons for its continuation. In contrast, because African-American family organization and Black civil society have both been markedly reorganized since World War II, one must question in what form and even whether these themes endure.

Rather than viewing the themes as "normative" and then evaluating how contemporary African-American women do not measure up to some sort of "essentialist" Black women's standpoint, a better use of these themes views them as culturally specific, resilient lifelines that can be continually refashioned in response to changing contexts. Just as culture itself is dynamic and changing, the enduring themes characterizing a Black women's standpoint become shaped in dialogue with actual social practices. Stated differently, these themes encompass a complex network of ideas *and* social practices engaged in dialogue with one another. Within this context, U.S. Black women's agency becomes important in determining what a Black women's standpoint on motherhood will be, which themes characterizing this standpoint will endure, and whether new, culturally specific, resilient lifelines must be created to ensure collective survival. In some cases, a lifeline may form the foundation for new ways of dealing with social problems of special concern to African-Americans. U.S. Black working mothers' needs for child care, the chronically poor education offered to Black children in underfunded, inner-city public schools, the disproportionate numbers of young Black men who have arrest records or are incarcerated, and the large numbers of African-American children currently in government-run foster care all constitute new versions of some old problems of special concern to African-American women. One might ask in what ways the enduring themes may be reconstructed to respond to these types of social concerns. Alternately, some themes may prove more beneficial in grappling with these issues, and other themes may have outlived their usefulness. Viewing the enduring themes in this fashion tests them

against the challenges of actual social conditions. Moreover, because this approach remains grounded in Black women's agency, it emphasizes the significance of Black women's ideas and actions in using this standpoint to meet the specific political, economic, and social challenges of today.

Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks

In many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Troester 1984).

The centrality of women in African-American extended families reflects both a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and nation (Tanner 1974; Stack 1974; Martin and Martin 1978; Sudarkasa 1981b; Reagon 1987). Women's centrality is characterized less by the *absence* of husbands and fathers than by the significance of women. Though men may be physically present or have well-defined and culturally significant roles in the extended family, the kin unit tends to be woman-centered. Bebe Moore Campbell's (1989) parents separated when she was small. Even though she spent the school year in the North Philadelphia household maintained by her grandmother and mother, Campbell's father assumed an important role in her life. "My father took care of me," Campbell remembers. "Our separation didn't stunt me or condemn me to a lesser humanity. His absence never made me a fatherless child. I'm not fatherless now" (p. 271). In woman-centered kin units such as Campbell's—whether a mother-child household unit, a married couple household, or a larger unit extending over several households—the centrality of mothers is not predicated on male powerlessness (Tanner 1974, 133).

Organized, resilient, women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers are key in understanding this centrality. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another's children. Historically, when needed, temporary child-care arrangements often turned into long-term care or informal adoption (Stack 1974; Gutman 1976). These practices continue in the face of changing social pressures. Andrea Hunter's (1997) research on Black grandmothers explores how Black parents rely on grandmothers for parenting support. This traditional source of support became even more needed in the 1980s and 1990s, when increasing numbers of Black mothers saw their teenage children fall victim to drugs and the

crime associated with it. Many witnessed their sons killed or incarcerated, while their daughters became addicts. In many cases, these young men and women left behind children, who often ended up in foster care. Other children did not, primarily because their grandmothers took responsibility for raising them, often under less than optimal conditions.

In many African-American communities these women-centered networks of community-based child care have extended beyond the boundaries of biologically related individuals to include "fictive kin" (Stack 1974). Civil rights activist Ella Baker describes how informal adoption by othermothers functioned in the rural Southern community of her childhood:

> My aunt who had thirteen children of her own raised three more. She had become a midwife, and a child was born who was covered with sores. Nobody was particularly wanting the child, so she took the child and raised him . . . and another mother decided she didn't want to be bothered with two children. So my aunt took one and raised him . . . they were part of the family. (Cantarow 1980, 59)

Stanlie James recounts how othermother traditions work with notions of fictive kin within her own extended family. James notes that the death of her grandmother in 1988 reunited her family, described as a host of biological and fictive kin. James's rendition of how one female family member helped James's nine-year-old daughter deal with the loss of her great-grandmother illustrates the interactions among women-centered extended kin networks, fictive kin, and othermother traditions. The woman who helped James's daughter was not a blood relative but had been "othermothered" by James's grandmother and was a full member of the extended family. James's grandmother believed that because all children must be fed, clothed, and educated, if their biological parents could not discharge these obligations, then some other member of the community should accept that responsibility. As James points out, "This fictive kin who stepped in to counsel my daughter was upholding a family tradition that had been modeled by my grandmother some fifty years before" (James 1993, 44).

Even when relationships are not between kin or fictive kin, African-American community norms traditionally were such that neighbors cared for one another's children. Sara Brooks, a Southern domestic worker, describes the importance that the community-based child care a neighbor offered her daughter had for her: "She kept Vivian and she didn't charge me nothin either. You see, people used to look after each other, but now its not that way. I reckon its because we all was poor, and I guess they put theirself in the place of the person that they was helpin' " (Simonsen 1986, 181). Brooks's experiences demonstrate how the African-American cultural value placed on cooperative child care traditionally found institutional support in the adverse conditions under which so many Black women mothered.

Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood. In confronting racial oppression, maintaining community-based child care and respecting othermothers who assume child-care responsibilities can serve a critical function in African-American communities. Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers, who, like Ella Baker's aunt, take in additional children even when they have enough of their own.

Young women are often carefully groomed at an early age to become othermothers. As a 10-year-old, Ella Baker learned to be an othermother by caring for the children of a widowed neighbor: "Mama would say, 'You must take the clothes to Mr. Powell's house, and give so-and-so a bath.' The children were running wild. . . . The kids . . . would take off across the field. We'd chase them down, and bring them back, and put 'em in the tub, and wash 'em off, and change clothes, and carry the dirty ones home, and wash them. Those kind of things were routine" (Cantarow 1980, 59).

Many Black men also value community-based child care but historically have exercised these values to a lesser extent. During slavery, for example, Black children under age 10 experienced little division of labor. They were dressed alike and performed similar tasks. If the activities of work and play are any indication of the degree of gender role differentiation that existed among slave children, "then young girls probably grew up minimizing the difference between the sexes while learning far more about the differences between the races" (D. White 1985, 94). Because they are often left in charge of younger siblings, many young Black men learn how to care for children. Geoffrey Canada (1995) recounts how he had to learn how to fight in his urban neighborhood. The climate of violence that he and his two brothers encountered mandated developing caretaking skills, especially since his single mother had to work and could not offer them the protection that they needed. Thus, differences among Black men and women in behaviors concerning children may have more to do with male labor force patterns and similar factors. As Ella Baker observes, "My father took care of people too, but . . . my father had to work" (Cantarow 1980, 60).

Historically, within Black diasporic societies, community-based child care and the relationships among bloodmothers and othermothers in women-centered networks have taken diverse institutional forms. In some polygynous West African societies, the children of the same father but different mothers referred to one another as brothers and sisters. While a strong bond existed between the biological mother and her child—one so strong that, among the Ashanti for example, "to show disrespect towards one's mother is tantamount to sacrilege" (Fortes 1950, 263)—children could be disciplined by any of their "mothers."

Cross-culturally, the high status given to othermothers and the cooperative nature of child-care arrangements among bloodmothers and othermothers in Caribbean and other Black diasporic societies gives credence to the importance that people of African descent place on mothering (Sudarkasa 1981a).

Although the political economy of slavery brought profound changes to Africans enslaved in the United States, beliefs in the importance of motherhood and the value of cooperative approaches to child care continued. During slavery, while older women served as nurses and midwives, their most common occupation was caring for the children of parents who worked (D. White 1985). Informal adoption of orphaned children reinforced the importance of social motherhood in African-American communities (Gutman 1976). The relationship between bloodmothers and othermothers also survived the transition from a slave economy to post-emancipation Southern rural agriculture. Children in Southern rural communities were not solely the responsibility of their biological mothers. Aunts, grandmothers, and others who had time to supervise children served as othermothers (Dougherty 1978). The significant status that women enjoyed in family networks and in African-American communities continued to be linked to their bloodmother and othermother activities.

In the 1980s, the entire community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers came under assault. Racial desegregation as well as the emergence of class-stratified Black neighborhoods greatly altered the fabric of Black civil society. African-Americans of diverse social classes found themselves in new residential, school, and work settings that tested this enduring theme of bloodmothers, othermothers, and woman-centered networks. In many inner-city, working-class neighborhoods, the very fabric of African-American community life eroded when crack cocaine flooded the streets. African-American children and youth often formed the casualties of this expanding market for drugs, from the increasing numbers of Black children in foster care (Nightingale 1993), to children threatened by violence (Canada 1995), to those killed. Residents of Central Harlem interviewed by anthropologist Leith Mullings repeatedly expressed concern about losing the community's children, leading Mullings to observe, "The depth of worry about children growing up in these conditions is difficult to convey" (Mullings 1997, 93). Given this situation, it is remarkable that even in the most troubled communities, remnants of the othermother tradition endure. Bebe Moore Campbell's 1950s North Philadelphia neighborhood underwent startling changes in the 1980s. Increases in child abuse and parental neglect left many children without care. But some residents, such as Miss Nee, continued the othermother tradition. After raising her younger brothers and sisters and five children of her own, Miss Nee cared for three additional children whose families fell apart. Moreover, on any given night Miss Nee's house may have been filled by up to a dozen children because she had a reputation for never turning away a needy child ("Children of the Underclass" 1989).

Black middle-class women and their families found challenges from another

direction. In some fundamental ways, moving into the middle class means adopting the values and lifestyles of White middle-class families. While the traditional family ideal is not the norm, the relative isolation of such families from others is noteworthy. U.S. middle-class family life is based on privatization—buying a big house so that one need not cooperate with one's neighbors, or even see them. American middle-class families participate in the privatization of everything, from schools and health care, to for-fee health clubs and private automobiles. Working-class African-Americans who experience social mobility thus may encounter a distinctly different value system. Not only are woman-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers much more difficult to sustain structurally—class-stratified residential and employment patterns mean that middle-class Black women often see working-class and poor Black women only as their employees or clients—such ideas are often anathema to the ethos of achievement. From the security firms that find ways to monitor nannies, to the gated-communities of suburbia, purchasing services appears to be the hallmark of American middle-class existence. In this context, stopping to help others to whom one is not related and doing it for free can be seen as rejecting the basic values of the capitalist market economy.

In this context, these relationships among bloodmothers and othermothers and the persistence of woman-centered networks may have greater theoretical importance than currently recognized. The traditional family ideal assigns mothers full responsibility for children and evaluates their performance based on their ability to procure the benefits of a nuclear family household. Within this capitalist marketplace model, those women who "catch" legal husbands, who live in single-family homes, who can afford private school and music lessons for their children, are deemed better mothers than those who do not. In this context, those African-American women who continue community-based child care challenge one fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system itself: that children are "private property" and can be disposed of as such. Under the property model that accompanies the traditional family ideal, parents may not literally assert that their children are pieces of property, but their parenting may reflect assumptions analogous to those they make in connection with property. For example, the exclusive parental "right" to discipline children as parents see fit, even if discipline borders on abuse, parallels the widespread assumption that property owners may dispose of their property without consulting members of the larger community.

By seeing the larger *community* as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents "rights" in child rearing, those African-Americans who endorse these values challenge prevailing capitalist property relations. In Harlem, for example, Black women are increasingly the breadwinners in their families, and rates of households maintained by single mothers remain high. These families are clearly under stress, yet to see the household formation itself as an indication of decline in Black family organization misreads a

more complex situation. Leith Mullings suggests that many of these households participate in fluid, familylike networks that have different purposes. Women activate some networks for socialization, reproduction, and consumption, and others for emotional support, economic cooperation, and sexuality. The networks may overlap, but they are not coterminous (Mullings 1997, 74).

The resiliency of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of family have been continually reworked to help African-Americans as a collectivity cope with and resist oppression. Moreover, these understandings of woman-centered kin networks become critical in understanding broader African-American understandings of community. At the same time, the erosion of such networks in the face of the changing institutional fabric of Black civil society points to the need either to refashion these networks or develop some other way of supporting Black children. For far too many African-American children, assuming that a grandmother or "fictive kin" will care for them is no longer a reality.

Mothers, Daughters, and Socialization for Survival

U.S. Black mothers of daughters face a troubling dilemma. On one hand, to ensure their daughters' physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into the sexual politics of Black womanhood. For example, as a young girl, Black activist Ann Moody questioned why she was paid so little for the domestic work she began at age nine, why Black women domestics were sexually harassed by their White male employers, and why Whites had so much more than Blacks. But her mother refused to answer her questions and actually chastised her for questioning the system and stepping out of her "place" (Moody 1968). Like Ann Moody, Black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible (Ladner 1972; Joseph 1981). New Yorker Michele Wallace recounts: "I can't remember when I first learned that my family expected me to work, to be able to take care of myself when I grew up. . . . It had been drilled into me that the best and only sure support was self-support" (1978, 89–90). Mothers also know that if their daughters uncritically accept the glorified "mammy work" and sexual politics offered Black women, they can become willing participants in their own subordination. Mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival, but at the high cost of their emotional destruction.

On the other hand, Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically

survive. When Ann Moody became active in the early 1960s in sit-ins and voter registration activities, her mother first begged her not to participate and then told her not to come home because she feared the Whites in Moody's hometown would kill her. Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions. Learning that they will work and that education is a vehicle for advancement can also be seen as ways of enhancing positive self-definitions and self-valuations in Black girls. Emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival.

Historian Elsa Barkley Brown describes this delicate balance Black mothers negotiate by pointing out that her mother's behavior demonstrated the "need to teach me to live my life one way and, at the same time, to provide all the tools I would need to live it quite differently" (1989, 929). Black daughters must learn how to survive the sexual politics of intersecting oppressions while rejecting and transcending these same power relations. In order to develop these skills in their daughters, mothers demonstrate varying combinations of behaviors devoted to ensuring their daughters' survival—such as providing them with basic necessities and protecting them in dangerous environments—to helping their daughters go further than mothers themselves were allowed to go (Joseph 1981, 1984). They remain simultaneously visionary about what is possible, yet pragmatic about what it might take to get there (James and Busia 1993).

This visionary pragmatism of many U.S. Black mothers may grow from the nature of work women have done to ensure Black children's survival. Their work experiences provide many Black women with a unique angle of vision, a particular perspective on the world to be passed on to their daughters. As is the case for women in Black diaspora societies, African-American women have long integrated economic self-reliance and mothering. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood associated with the traditional family ideal, in which paid work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood. Sara Brooks describes the powerful connections that economic self-reliance and mothering had in her childhood: "When I was about nine I was nursin my sister Sally—I'm about seven or eight years older than Sally. And when I would put her to sleep, instead of me goin somewhere and sit down and play, I'd get my little old hoe and get out there and work right in the field around the house" (in Simonsen 1986, 86).

Mothers who are domestic workers or who work in proximity to Whites may experience a unique relationship with the dominant group. For example, African-American women domestics are exposed to all the intimate details of the lives of their White employers. Working for Whites offers domestic workers a view from the inside and exposes them to ideas and resources that might aid in their children's upward mobility. In some cases domestic workers form close, long-lasting relationships with their employers. But domestic workers also encounter some of the harshest exploitation confronting U.S. racial/ethnic

women. The work is low paid, has few benefits, and exposes women to the threat and reality of sexual harassment. Black domestics could see the dangers awaiting their daughters.

Willi Coleman's mother used a Saturday-night hair-combing ritual to impart her views on domestic work to her daughters:

> Except for special occasions mama came home from work early on Saturdays. She spent six days a week mopping, waxing and dusting other women's houses and keeping out of reach of other women's husbands. Saturday nights were reserved for "taking care of them girls" hair and the telling of stories. Some of which included a recitation of what she had endured and how she had triumphed over "folks that were lower than dirt" and "no-good snakes in the grass." She combed, patted, twisted and talked, saying things which would have embarrassed or shamed her at other times. (Coleman 1987, 34)

Bonnie Thornton Dill's (1980) study of the child-rearing goals of domestic workers illustrates how many African-American women see their work as both contributing to their children's survival and instilling values that will encourage their children to reject their "place" and strive for more. Providing a better chance for their children was a dominant theme among Black women. Domestic workers described themselves as "struggling to give their children the skills and training they did not have; and as praying that opportunities which had not been open to them would be open to their children" (p. 110). But the women also realized that although they wanted to communicate the value of their work as part of the ethics of caring and personal accountability, the work itself was undesirable. Bebe Moore Campbell's (1989) grandmother and college-educated mother stressed the importance of education. Campbell remembers, "[They] wanted me to Be Somebody, to be the second generation to live out my life as far away from a mop and scrub brush and Miss Ann's floors as possible" (p. 83).

Understanding this goal of balancing the need for the physical survival of their daughters with the vision of encouraging them to transcend the boundaries of the sexual politics of Black womanhood explains many apparent contradictions in Black mother-daughter relationships. U.S. Black mothers are often described as strong disciplinarians and overly protective; yet these same women manage to raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive. To explain this apparent contradiction, Gloria Wade-Gayles suggests that Black mothers

> do not socialize their daughters to be "passive" or "irrational." Quite the contrary, they socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident. Black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women. (1984, 12)

African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by try-

ing to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their derogated status or by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect themselves. Consider the following verse from a traditional blues song:

> I ain't good lookin' and ain't got waist-long hair
> I say I ain't good lookin' and ain't got waist-long hair
> But my mama gave me something that'll take me anywhere.
> (Washington 1984, 144)

Unlike White women, symbolized by "good looks" and "waist-long hair," Black women have been denied male protection. Under such conditions Black mothers aim to teach their daughters skills that will "take them anywhere."

Black women's autobiographies and fiction can be read as texts revealing the multiple ways that African-American mothers aim to shield their daughters from the demands of being Black women in U.S. sexual politics. Michele Wallace describes her growing understanding of how her mother viewed raising Black daughters in Harlem: "My mother has since explained to me that since it was obvious her attempt to protect me was going to prove a failure, she was determined to make me realize that as a black girl in white America I was going to find it an uphill climb to keep myself together" (1978, 98). In discussing the mother-daughter relationship in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* Rosalie Troester catalogs the ways mothers have aimed to protect their daughters and the impact this may have on relationships themselves:

> Black mothers, particularly those with strong ties to their community, sometimes build high banks around their young daughters, isolating them from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous women. Often these dikes are religious, but sometimes they are built with education, family, or the restrictions of a close-knit and homogeneous community. . . . This isolation causes the currents between Black mothers and daughters to run deep and the relationship to be fraught with an emotional intensity often missing from the lives of women with more freedom. (1984, 13)

Michele Wallace's mother built banks around her headstrong adolescent daughter by institutionalizing her in a Catholic home for troubled girls. Wallace went willingly: "I thought at the time that I would rather live in hell than be with my mother" (1978, 98). But years later Wallace's evaluation of her mother's decision changed: "Now that I know my mother better, I know that her sense of powerlessness made it all the more essential to her that she take radical action" (p. 98).

African-American mothers often try to protect their daughters from the dangers that lie ahead by offering them a sense of their own unique self-worth. Many contemporary Black women writers report the experience of being singled out, of being given at an early age a sense of specialness that encouraged them to

develop their talents. My own mother marched me to the public library at age five, helped me get my first library card, and told me that I could do anything if I learned how to read. In discussing the works of Paule Marshall, Dorothy West, and Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington observes that all three writers make special claims about the roles their mothers played in the development of their creativity: "The bond with their mothers is such a fundamental and powerful source that the term 'mothering the mind' might have been coined specifically to define their experiences as writers" (1984, 144).

Black women's efforts to provide a physical and psychic base for their children can affect mothering styles and the emotional intensity of Black mother-daughter relationships. As Gloria Wade-Gayles points out, "Mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted . . . they are rarely affectionate" (1984, 10). For example, in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1974), Eva Peace's husband ran off, leaving her with three small children and no money. Despite her feelings, "the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and energy for it" (p. 32). Later in the novel, Eva's daughter Hannah asks, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (p. 67). Eva angrily replies, "What you talkin' bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you" (p. 69). For far too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children in intersecting oppressions are sometimes so demanding that they have neither the time nor the patience for affection. And yet most Black daughters love and admire their mothers and are convinced that their mothers truly love them (Joseph 1981).

Elaine Bell Kaplan's (1997) study of Black teenage pregnancy reveals much about the mothering styles and emotional intensity of Black mother-daughter relationships. Kaplan points out that the sociological literature makes two assumptions about Black teenage mothers and their mothers: first, that adult Black women are supportive of their daughter's pregnancies and encourage them to keep and raise the babies; and second, that this attitude is linked to the existence of an extended kin network. Kaplan's research refutes both assumptions. Teen mothers often defied their mothers' demands that they have abortions, and conflicts between the teen mothers and their mothers grew more intense after the birth of the babies. Many of the teen mothers said that their mothers "were tremendously angry at them and never forgave them" (Kaplan 1997, 52). The majority of the teen mothers in Kaplan's study who had left or were leaving their mothers' homes did so because of continual fights over their pregnancies. All of the adult mothers worked hard to support them, and were deeply disappointed with their daughters, but for different reasons. Lower-income mothers felt their pregnant daughters had failed them. Until the pregnancy, this group had hoped their daughters would do better with their lives than they had. Middle-income mothers felt cheated. They had worked hard, and their daughters had thrown it all away.

Black daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environments have

to come to terms with their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love extant in popular culture, whether the stay-at-home Mom of the traditional family ideas or the superstrong Black mother, and the often troubled mothers in their lives. For a daughter, growing up means developing a better understanding that even though she may desire more affection and greater freedom, her mother's physical care and protection are acts of maternal love. Ann Moody describes her growing awareness of the cost her mother paid as a domestic worker who was a single mother of three. Watching her mother sleep after the birth of another child, Moody remembers:

> For a long time I stood there looking at her. I didn't want to wake her up. I wanted to enjoy and preserve that calm, peaceful look on her face, I wanted to think she would always be that happy. . . . Adline and Junior were too young to feel the things I felt and know the things I knew about Mama. They couldn't remember when she and Daddy separated. They had never heard her cry at night as I had or worked and helped as I had done when we were starving. (1968, 57)

Moody initially sees her mother as a strict disciplinarian, a woman who tries to protect her daughter by withholding information. But as Moody matures and better understands the domains of power in her community, her ideas change. On one occasion Moody left school early the day after a Black family had been brutally murdered by local Whites. Moody's description of her mother's reaction reflects her deepening understanding: "When I walked in the house Mama didn't even ask me why I came home. She just looked at me. And for the first time I realized she understood what was going on within me or was trying to anyway" (1968, 136).

Another example of a daughter's efforts to understand her mother is offered in Renita Weems's account of coming to grips with maternal desertion. In the following passage Weems struggles with the difference between the stereotypical image of the superstrong Black mother and her own alcoholic mother's decision to leave her children: "My mother loved us. I must believe that. She worked all day in a department store bakery to buy shoes and school tablets, came home to curse out neighbors who wrongly accused her children of any impropriety (which in an apartment complex usually meant stealing), and kept her house cleaner than most sober women" (1984, 26). Weems concludes that her mother loved her because she provided for her to the best of her ability.

Othermothers often help to defuse the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters. In recounting how she dealt with the intensity of her relationship with her mother, Weems describes the women teachers, neighbors, friends, and othermothers she turned to—women who, she observes, "did not have the onus of providing for me, and so had the luxury of talking to me" (1984, 27). Cheryl West's household included her brother, her lesbian mother, and Jan, her mother's lover. Jan became an othermother to West: "Yellow-colored, rotund and short in stature, Jan was like a second mother. . . .

Jan braided my hair in the morning, mother worked two jobs and tucked me in at night. Loving, gentle, and fastidious in the domestic arena, Jan could be a rigid disciplinarian. . . . To the outside world . . . she was my 'aunt' who happened to live with us. But she was much more involved and nurturing than any of my 'real' aunts" (1987, 43). This may be changing. The pregnant teenagers in Elaine Bell Kaplan's study had few women teachers, neighbors, or Jans in their lives. They felt the full force of the erosion of woman-centered kin networks. Perceiving their bloodmothers as unsupportive during a crucial time in their lives, only four of the thirty-two teen mothers in Kaplan's study said they could rely on other family members for support. Instead, more than three-quarters said they counted on friends (Kaplan 1997, 59).

June Jordan offers an eloquent analysis of one daughter's realization of the high personal cost African-American women can pay in providing for their children. In the following passage Jordan offers a powerful testament of how she came to see that her mother's work was an act of love:

> As a child I noticed the sadness of my mother as she sat alone in the kitchen at night. . . . Her woman's work never won permanent victories of any kind. It never enlarged the universe of her imagination or her power to influence what happened beyond the front door of our house. Her woman's work never tickled her to laugh or shout or dance. But she did raise me to respect her way of offering love and to believe that hard work is often the irreducible factor for survival, not something to avoid. Her woman's work produced a reliable home base where I could pursue the privileges of books and music. Her woman's work invented the potential for a completely different kind of work for us, the next generation of Black women: huge, rewarding hard work demanded by the huge, new ambitions that her perfect confidence in us engendered. (1985, 105)

Community Othermothers and Political Activism

U.S. Black women's experiences as othermothers provide a foundation for conceptualizing Black women's political activism. Experiences both of being nurtured as children and being held responsible for siblings and fictive kin within kin networks can stimulate a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women. These women not only feel accountable to their own kin, they experience a bond with all of the Black community's children. In her study of Black professional women workers during the Jim Crow era, historian Stephanie J. Shaw's *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do* describes this bond as reflecting an ethic of socially responsible individualism. Within this ethic, families and community mentors imbued the highly educated Black women in her study with a determination to use their education in a socially responsible way. Consequently, "these women became not simply

schoolteachers, nurses, social workers, and librarians; they became . . . political and social leaders" (Shaw 1996, 2).

Because factors such as social class differences among African-Americans, region of the country, and the degree of racial discrimination in housing, education, jobs, and public services all influence Black community organization, othermother traditions characterizing Black women's community work have taken various forms. One concerns how these ideas impact daily interaction among Black women, children, and youth. Historically, this notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children often allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families. For example, sociologist Karen Fields describes how her grandmother, Mamie Garvin Fields, draws on her power as a community othermother when dealing with unfamiliar children: "She will say to a child on the street who looks up to no good, picking out a name at random, 'Aren't you Miz Pinckney's boy?' in that same reproving tone. If the reply is, 'No, *ma'am,* my mother is Miz Gadsden,' whatever threat there was dissipates" (Fields and Fields 1983, xvii).

The use of family language in referring to members of the African-American community also illustrates the socially responsible individualism of Black women's community work. In the following passage, Mamie Garvin Fields describes how she became active in surveying substandard housing conditions among African-Americans in Charleston. Note her explanation of why she uses family language:

> I was one of the volunteers they got to make a survey of the places where we were paying extortious rents for indescribable property. I said "we," although it wasn't Bob and me. We had our own home, and so did many of the Federated Women. Yet we still felt like it really was "we" living in those terrible places, and it was up to us to do something about them. (Fields and Fields 1983, 195)

Black women frequently use family language to describe Black children. In recounting her increasingly successful efforts to teach a boy who had given other teachers problems, my daughter's kindergarten teacher stated, "You know how it can be—the majority of children in the learning disabled classes are *our children*. I know he didn't belong there, so I volunteered to take him." In their statements both women use family language to describe the ties that bind them as Black women to their responsibilities as members of African-American communities.

Black women writers also explore this theme of African-American community othermothers who, via their socially responsible individualism, engage in Black women's community work. One of the earliest examples is found in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*. By rejecting an opportunity to marry a prestigious physician and disassociate herself from the Black community, nearly White Iola, the main character, chooses instead to serve the African-American

community. Similarly, in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), the main character rejects the controlling image of the "happy slave," the self-sacrificing Black mother, and chooses to become a community othermother. Giving up her biological child to the care of an othermother, Meridian gets an education, works in the civil rights movement, and eventually takes on responsibility for the children of a small Southern town. She engages in a "quest that will take her beyond the society's narrow meaning of the word *mother* as a physical state and expand its meaning to those who create, nurture, and save life in social and psychological as well as physical terms" (Christian 1985, 242).

Studying Black women leaders in a Northern, urban community, sociologist Cheryl Gilkes (1980, 1983b) suggests that community othermother relationships can be key in stimulating Black women's decisions to become social activists. Gilkes asserts that many of the Black women community activists in her study became involved in community organizing in response to the needs of their own children and of those in their neighborhoods. The following comment is typical of how many of the Black women in Gilkes's study relate to Black children: "There were alot of summer programs springing up for kids, but they were exclusive . . . and I found that most of *our kids* were excluded" (1980, 219). Nancy Naples's (1991, 1996) work on what she labels *activist mothering* by Black and Latina women in low-income urban neighborhoods identifies a similar ideology. Like the women in Gilkes's studies, the women in Naples's study also entered community politics in direct response to the needs of their children. But their very definitions of good mothering went beyond a simple measure of caring for their own biological children. Instead, they saw good mothering as comprising all actions, including social activism, that addressed the needs of their children and community (Naples 1996, 230). For Black women in both studies, what began as the daily expression of their obligations to their children and as community othermothers often developed into full-fledged actions as community leaders.

This community othermother tradition also explains the "mothering the mind" relationships that can develop between African-American women teachers and their Black female and male students. Unlike the traditional mentoring so widely reported in educational literature, this relationship goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts. Gloria Wade-Gayles describes this special bond that she cultivates with her students at Spelman College: "I was like a plant from which one takes cuttings. A piece for this one. A piece for that one. . . . Although there were times when I could feel the blade, I did not regret the cuttings. They strengthened my roots" (Wade-Gayles 1996, 32–33). Like the mother-daughter relationship, this "mothering the mind" among Black women seeks to move toward the mutuality of a shared sisterhood that binds African-American women as community othermothers.

Community othermothers have made important contributions in building a different type of community in often hostile political and economic surround-

ings (Reagon 1987). Community othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead, the connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward.

Motherhood as a Symbol of Power

Motherhood—whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother—can be invoked as a symbol of power by African-American women engaged in Black women's community work. Certainly much of Black women's status within women-centered kin networks stems from their important contributions as bloodmothers and othermothers. Moreover, much of U.S. Black women's status in African-American communities stems from their activist mothering as community othermothers. Some of the most highly respected Black women in working-class Black neighborhoods are those who demonstrate an ethic of community service.

Black communities and neighborhoods have long had women who served as community othermothers. The existence of this tradition among middle-class Black women has been recognized and studied via attention to middle-class Black women's political traditions (see, e.g., Giddings 1988; Higginbotham 1993; Shaw 1996). However, the community othermother traditions of working-class and poor Black women such as those examined by Nancy Naples (1991, 1996) remain underemphasized within U.S. Black feminism. Instead, those community othermothers who do receive well-deserved recognition do so in large part because of the confluence of unusual circumstances and their *individual* characteristics. We know of Fannie Lou Hamer because she was both so exceptional and her actions on behalf of African-Americans occurred during an historic era that granted her media visibility. In contrast, most community othermothers simply work on behalf of the children, women, and men of their communities with little fanfare or recognition. While efforts on behalf of Black children often may catalyze their actions, working on behalf of the community means addressing the multifaceted issues within it. These women often remain nameless in scholarly texts, yet everyone in their neighborhoods knows their names.

Black women's involvement in community work forms one important basis for power within Black civil society. This is the type of power many African-Americans have in mind when they describe the "strong Black women" they hope will revitalize contemporary Black neighborhoods. Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability. Such power is transformative in that Black women's relationships with children and other vulnerable community members are not

intended to dominate or control. Rather, their purpose is to bring people along, to—in the words of late-nineteenth-century Black feminists—"uplift the race" so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance.

When older African-American women invoke their power as community othermothers, the results can be quite striking. Sociologist Charles Johnson (1934/1979) describes the behavior of an elderly Black woman at a church service in rural 1930s Alabama. Even though she was not on the program, the woman stood up to speak. The master of ceremonies rang for her to sit down, but she refused to do so, saying, "I am the mother of this church, and I will say what I please" (p. 172). The master of ceremonies offered the following explanation to the congregation as to why he let the woman continue: "Brothers, I know you all honor Sister Moore. Course our time is short but she has acted as a mother to me. . . . Any time old folks get up I give way to them" (p. 173).

The activist mothering of Black women's community work (see, e.g, Naples 1991, 1996) and the power it often engenders remain misunderstood. Often called "maternal politics" within North American and European-influenced feminisms, patterns of Black women's political activism associated with community othermother traditions as well as the power and recognition offered such women by African-Americans become derogated. Take for example, Julia Wells's arguments in an article titled "Maternal Politics in Organizing Black South African Women." According to Wells, maternal politics refers to "political movements which are rooted in women's defense of their roles as mothers and protectors of their children" (Wells 1998, 251). Citing as examples the cases of the South African women's antipass campaigns of the 1960s and mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina starting in 1979, Wells suggests that such movements develop because many women view their maternal roles as the driving force behind public political actions. Wells then distinguishes between "maternal politics" and "feminism." I cite Wells at length because her ideas succinctly state beliefs that are more diffusely held.

> Maternal politics are clearly not to be confused with feminism. Women swept up in mother-centered movements are not fighting for their own personal rights as women but for their custodial rights as mothers. Since concepts of the sanctity of motherhood are so deeply entrenched in the social fabric of most societies, this strategy often proves effective where other attempts to generate social change fail. So potent has been the traditional discourse on motherhood that husbands, families, and government officials all tend to acknowledge and respect the heartrending claims of mothers, giving women an unusual amount of political space in which to organize. Significant allies are easily won over, strengthening the political clout of such movements. Nevertheless, these movements must be recognized as limited in scope, duration, and success in achieving their goals and, above all, should not be mistaken for political maturity. (Wells 1998, 253)

This type of thinking sets up a hierarchy of feminisms, assigns the type engaged in by U.S. Black women and women in Africa (see, e.g., Iweriebor 1998) a secondary status, and fails to recognize motherhood as a symbol of power. Instead, the activist mothering associated with Black women's community work becomes portrayed as a "politically immature" vehicle claimed by women who fail to develop a so-called radical analysis of the family as the site of oppression similar to that advanced within Western feminism.

Feminist claims that "maternal politics" represents an immature form of political activism certainly raise questions for motherhood as a symbol of power in African-American communities. Black women's community work can be understood via maternal rhetoric as a static system of ideas that can be evaluated using some externally derived allegedly feminist criteria. But another approach views Black women's understandings of motherhood as a symbol of power and the activist mothering it might engender as an enduring theme that *politicizes* Black women. Viewing motherhood as a symbol of power can catalyze Black women to take actions that they otherwise might not have considered. For example, when Mamie Till Bradley's 14-year-old son, Emmett Till, was brutally murdered in Mississippi in the summer of 1955, Ms. Bradley found herself in the center of a national controversy. This 33-year-old Chicago resident "wanted the whole world to see" what had happened to her son (Feldstein 1994). "She insisted that his battered body appear in an open casket at the funeral." Similarly, a Black mother approached me after a talk I gave at a Detroit-area college. With her two children in tow, a boy age ten, and a girl age five, she described the challenges of leaving a marriage and moving back to Detroit as a single parent. Describing the limitations of her children's new school, this mother shared the horrible story of how a classmate had held a gun to her son's head. Despite this situation, this woman said that she was not moving—she would stay and fight. Certainly her actions can be seen as fighting for her own children. But she clearly understood that motherhood could be a symbol of power in that setting. Motherhood politicized her.

Not just Black women but those who care about Black women can also access the potential power associated with activist mothering. Writer Lisa Jones describes the politicization of her White mother as she came to understand the obstacles confronting her mixed-race, Black daughter: "Motherhood has been more than a domestic chore or emotional bond for my mother. It's a political vocation—one she's taken seriously enough to go up against the world for" (Jones 1994, 34). Studies of White mothers of mixed-race children confirm this phenomenon of White mothers becoming politicized in fighting the battles confronting their Black children. Raising their Black children in racist environments fosters new views of motherhood for many of these women. This is an entirely different understanding of political activism and empowerment than fighting on one's own behalf. To label this type of socially responsible individualism as "politically immature" seems especially misguided.

The View from the Inside: The Personal Meaning of Mothering

Within African-American communities, women's innovative and practical approaches to mothering under oppressive conditions often bring recognition and foster their empowerment. But this situation should not obscure the costs of motherhood to many U.S. Black women. Black motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution. African-American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers' ability to cope with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation should not be confused with transcending the injustices characterizing these oppressions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature.

Certain dimensions of motherhood advanced both via the traditional family ideal and via Black community expectations are clearly problematic for Black women. Coping with unwanted pregnancies and being unable to care for one's children is oppressive. Sara Brooks remembers, "I had babies one after another because I never knew how to avoid having babies and I didn't ask nobody, so I didn't know nothin. . . . After I separated from my husband, I *still* didn't know nothin, so there come Vivian" (Simonsen 1986, 174). Brooks became pregnant again even though she was unmarried and had three children from her marriage whom she could not support. Brooks describes the strain placed on Black women who must mother under oppressive conditions: "I hated it. . . . I didn't want no other baby. I couldn't hardly take care of myself, and I had other kids I'da loved to have taken care of, and I couldn't do that" (p. 177). Like Brooks, many Black women have children they really do not want. When combined with Black community values claiming that good Black women always want their children, ignorance about reproductive issues leaves many Black women with unplanned pregnancies and the long-term responsibilities of parenting.

Ann Moody's mother also did not celebrate her repeated pregnancies. Moody remembers her mother's feelings when her mother started "getting fat" and her boyfriend stopped coming by: "Again Mama started crying every night. . . . When I heard Mama crying at night, I felt so bad. She wouldn't cry until we were all in bed and she thought we were sleeping. Every night I would lie awake for hours listening to her sobbing quietly in her pillow. The bigger she got the more she cried, and I did too" (Moody 1968, 46). To her children, Moody's mother may have appeared to be the stereotypical strong Black mother, but Ann Moody was able to see the cost her mother paid for living with this controlling image.

Dealing with an unwanted pregnancy can have tragic consequences. All Sara Brooks could think about was "doing away with this baby." She self-medicated herself and almost died. But she was luckier than her mother. As Brooks recalls,

"My momma, she got pregnant too close behind me—it was an unwanted pregnancy—and so she taken turpentine and she taken too much, I guess, and she died. She bled to death and died" (Simonsen 1986, 160). She was not alone. Prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* U.S. Supreme Court decision that a woman's right to personal privacy gave her the right to decide whether or not to have an abortion, large numbers of women who died from illegal abortions were Black. In New York, for example, during the several years preceding the decriminalization of abortions, 80 percent of the women who died from illegal abortions were Black or Puerto Rican (Davis 1981).

Strong pronatalist values in African-American communities often vest adult status on women who become biological mothers. For many, becoming a biological mother is often seen as a significant first step toward womanhood. Annie Amiker, an elderly Black woman, describes the situation in the rural Mississippi of her childhood. When asked if there were many girls with out-of-wedlock children, she replied, "There was some but not many—not many because when you run upon a girl who had a child the other girls wouldn't have nothing to do with her . . . she was counted as a grown person so she wasn't counted among the young people" (Parker 1979, 268). Joyce Ladner describes how this link between adult status and motherhood operates in low-income urban communities: "If there was one common standard for becoming a woman that was accepted by the majority of the people in the community, it was the time when girls gave birth to their first child. This line of demarcation was extremely clear and separated the *girls* from the *women*" (1972, 212).

Despite high personal costs, Ann Moody's mother, Sara Brooks, and an overwhelming majority of unmarried Black adolescent mothers choose to keep their children. In part, this may reflect strong pronatalist values. However, Black women's willingness to sacrifice for their children may stem from a deep-seated but largely unstated reliance on motherhood in the absence of committed love relationships with Black men. In a harsh environment where sexual politics leaves far too many U.S. Black women alone, children provide solace and love.

The pain of knowing what lies ahead for Black children while feeling powerless to protect them is another problematic dimension of Black mothering. Michele Wallace remembers, "I can understand why my mother felt desperate. No one else thought it would be particularly horrible if I got pregnant or got married before I had grown up, if I never completed college. I was a black girl" (1978, 98). In a 1904 letter, a Black mother in the South wrote to a national magazine:

> I dread to see my children grow. I know not their fate. Where the white girl has one temptation, mine will have many. Where the white boy has every opportunity and protection, mine will have few opportunities and no protection. It does not matter how good or wise my children may be, they are colored. When I have said that, all is said. Everything is forgiven

> in the South but color. (Lerner 1972, 158)

Protecting Black children remains a primary concern of African-American mothers. Black children are at risk for higher infant mortality, poor nutrition, inferior housing, environmental pollutants, AIDS, and a host of other social problems. Because it can strike at random, violence is of special concern to Black mothers. Anthropologist Leith Mullings reports that women in Harlem spend an "extraordinary amount of time escorting children, limiting their movement, and trying by any means to keep them away from the violence of the streets" (Mullings 1997, 93). Such women organize building-by-building and block-by-block struggles to rid their neighborhoods of drug dealers. Because drug-related income may be the primary source of income for many low-income families, these mothers' efforts are often unsuccessful. But still they try. One mother expresses this general concern for Black children:

> I turn my eyes on the little children, and keep on praying that one of them will grow up at the right second, when the schoolteachers have time to say hello and give him the lessons he needs, and when they get rid of the building here and let us have a place you can breathe in and not get bitten all the time, and when the men can find work—because they *can't* have children, and so they have to drink or get on drugs to find some happy moments, and some hope about things. (Lerner 1972, 315)

To this mother, even though her children are her hope, the conditions under which she must mother are intolerable.

Black mothers also pay the cost of giving up their own dreams of achieving full creative ability. "When," Alice Walker asks, "did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?" (1983, 239). Historically, much of that creativity could be expressed through music, much of it within Black churches. Many Black women blues singers, poets, and artists manage to incorporate their art into their daily responsibilities as bloodmothers and othermothers. But for far too many African-American women who are weighed down by the incessant responsibilities of mothering others, that creative spark never finds full expression.

Harriet Jacobs's autobiography gives a clear example of one mother's denial of her own self-actualization and illustrates the costs paid by Black mothers who assume the heavy responsibilities inherent in their bloodmother and othermother relationships. Jacobs desperately wanted to escape slavery but explains how having children created a particular dilemma:

> I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage. (1860/1987, 59)

Black mothers like those of Ann Moody and June Jordan and women like Harriet Jacobs and Sara Brooks are examples of women who gave up their freedom for the sake of their children. Community othermothers like Mamie Fields and Miss Nee pay a similar cost, not for the sake of their own biological children but for the Black community's children.

Despite the obstacles and costs, motherhood remains a symbol of hope for many of even the poorest Black women. One anonymous mother describes how she feels about her children:

> To me, having a baby inside me is the only time I'm really alive. I know I can make something, do something, no matter what color my skin is, and what names people call me. . . . You can see the little one grow and get larger and start doing things, and you feel there must be some hope, some chance that things will get better; because there it is, right before you, a real, live, growing baby. . . . The baby is a good sign, or at least he's *some* sign. If we didn't have that, what would be the difference from death? (Lerner 1972, 314)

Given the harshness of this mother's environment, her children offer hope. They are all she has.

Mothering is an empowering experience for many African-American women. Gwendolyn Brooks (1953) explores this issue of reproductive power in her novel *Maud Martha*. Maud Martha is virtually silent until she gives birth to her daughter, when "pregnancy and the birth of a child connect Maud to some power in herself, some power to speak, to be heard, to articulate feelings" (Washington 1987, 395). Her child serves as a catalyst for her movement into self-definition, self-valuation, and individual empowerment. Marita Golden describes a similar experience that illustrates how the special relationship between mother and child can foster a changed definition of self and an accompanying empowerment:

> Now I belonged to me. No parents or husband claiming me. . . . There was only my child who consumed and replenished me . . . my son's love was unconditional and, as such, gave me more freedom than any love I had known. . . . I at last accepted mama as my name. Realized that it did not melt down any other designations. Discovered that it expanded them—and me. (1983, 240–41)

This special relationship that Black mothers have with their children can also foster a creativity, a mothering of the mind and soul, for all involved. It is this gift that Alice Walker alludes to when she notes, "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (1983, 240).

But what cannot be overlooked in work emphasizing mothers' influences on their children is how Black children affirm their mothers and how important that affirmation can be in a society plagued by the sexual politics of Black woman-

hood. In her essay "One Child of One's Own," Alice Walker offers a vision of what African-American mother-child relationships can be:

> It is not my child who tells me: I have no femaleness white women must affirm. Not my child who says: I have no rights black men must respect. It is not my child who has purged my face from history and herstory, and left mystory just that, a mystery; my child loves my face and would have it on every page, if she could, as I have loved my own parents' faces above all others. . . . We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but *sisters* really, against whatever denies us all that we are. (Walker 1979b, 75)

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