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OF MULES AND MAMAS: FOUR WOMEN, AFRICANA MOTHERING, &  
RESISTANCE

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

EBONY OLIVIA LUMUMBA

December 2018

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## ABSTRACT

The black woman's humanity is unjustly linked to domestic responsibility and, thus, the traditional constraints of mothering. The roles of the mother and the created archetype of the mammy often become marred with the latter role overtaking the former—leaving black children without full benefit and access to their biological maternal parent. With the pervasive threat to black lives present in spaces all over the globe, for women of the African Diaspora, simply deciding to accept the role of a mother to a life that is physically, socially, and economically under siege is revolutionary. Considering this, the act of mothering, especially for women of color, exists as a potentially radical and revolutionary act which moves the effects of mothering beyond children, beyond traditional roles, and into the universe—making mothering limitless. This project focuses specifically on the mothering practices of black women that resist the oppressive systems designed to disenfranchise them and their communities. In this analysis, I engage the presence of black mothering as a revolutionary tool of resistance of systematic oppressions in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child*, Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

KEYWORDS: Mothering, Motherhood, Resistance, Liberation

## DEDICATION

For Grandma Ora Nell & her bone deep love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Motherhood is power. I'm grateful to the mamas who have shared their power with me. My mama who loved without limits—you saved me. My grandmother who penetrated my very soul with her bone deep love. Her love was cake thick and it cushioned us all against what the world tried to do to us. My “other mothers”—Kenya, Joni, Mother Anderson, Mama Nubia, Rukia, Big Mama Doris, Miranda, and those others who held my hands, wiped my tears, paid my bills, held my babies, listened and listened some more—the debt I owe to you is far too large to reconcile.

And to my babies—Alaké and Nubia—every heartbeat, kick, tantrum, smile, diaper change, giggle, ouchie, and “I love you, Mama” plays in my heart and makes up the soundtrack to my purpose. I'm watching you as you watch me and I'm reminded of exactly how I will survive.

To my committee—Drs. Adetayo Alabi, Leigh Anne Duck, Annette Trefzer, & Shennette Garrett-Scott. Your guidance and support was gracious and kind. Thank you for believing in a little girl from Mississippi.

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## **INTRODUCTION: NNE ANO: FOUR MOTHERS AND RESISTANCE**

The black woman's humanity is unjustly linked to domestic responsibility and, thus, the traditional constraints of mothering. As a cultural archetype, the black woman endures classification rife with stereotypical characterization and marginal figuring. For centuries, patriarchy and white supremacy have relegated black women to the margins and wholly ignored the need this specific demographic has for social autonomy and freedom. It has been the expectation that black women, who are shunned for any desire to think of themselves in the struggle for social freedom, best serve the larger community by nurturing it. Thus, the concept of mothering has socially stifled them in a manner that has limited their ability to strive for a freer existence for themselves, their offspring, and their communities. As the result of the limiting expectations placed upon black women in the mothering role, the fundamental capability of the role being a model of liberation and mode of resistance is often overlooked. Buchi Emecheta, Lorene Cary, Toni Cade Bambara, and Chimamanda Adichie produce narratives that unearth black mothering as an artifice for pursuing justice. Their texts exist as literary activism which demonstrates the ways women of the African Diaspora have reimagined the singular figuring of motherhood into methods that support their identities and communities against vast inequities and systemic disenfranchisement. The mother characters in their works represent black women's radicalization of mothering.

Black women occupy a nuanced position in relation to motherhood. With the pervasive threat to black lives present in spaces all over the globe, for women of the African Diaspora, simply deciding to accept the mother role to a life that is physically, socially, and economically



under siege is revolutionary. Loretta J. Ross describes mothering for black women as radical for its redefinition “as investing in others’ existence [...] far beyond biological determinism” (Gumbs xv). Compounding the role of motherhood with black identity complicates the experience considering the historical and vast mistreatment of black people all over the world.

Understanding the broadness and heterogeneity of the Diaspora, this project focuses specifically on black mothering in Nigeria and the United States as sites where black women demonstrate mothering practices that resist the oppressive systems designed to disenfranchise them and their communities. Through the works of Africana women writers Buchi Emecheta, Lorene Cary, Toni Cade Bambara, and Chimamanda Adichie, I examine black maternal characters who, despite the seeming adoption of their lot as “mule[s] of the world,” resist the oppressive expectation that they must pack the burdens of all onto their backs in order to bring about fundamental social change and how their reimagining of such a traditional role performs a sophisticated resistance to the projected mother archetype for black women (Walker 237). Thus, I bridge the worlds of literature and activism and argue that the act of mothering, especially for women of color, exists as a potentially radical and revolutionary act which moves the effects of mothering beyond children, beyond traditional roles, and into the universe—making mothering limitless.

While women across history and cultures have suffered marginalization distinctly associated with motherhood, maternal identity serves as a vital component in the imaging of black women within patriarchal narratives. The manifestation of the mother role may differ depending on culture, but the black woman as the ideal, powerless mother-figure possesses global breadth. Authors spanning various cultures and communities have peopled their texts with black women who occupy the role of a mother. I examine the works of all four women writers and assert a

transnational intertextuality as it relates to their inclusion of the mothering trope as a covert projection of Africana feminist power that subverts social repression. There is a conversation within the canon of black women's writing that centers on the mothering trope as a clearly defined archetype built by dominant culture that is projected predominately onto women of African descent. Yet, instead of exhibiting the traits generally tied to black motherhood, the mother characters in *The Joys of Motherhood* (Emecheta), *The Price of a Child* (Cary), *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (Bambara), and *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie) perform what Carolyn Gerald might designate as a "deliberate desecration and smashing of idols" that repurposes the repressive archetype of the black woman as a mere caretaker of children, nurse to the elderly, and provider of victuals. The black female writers in this study respond to this complicated and problematic notion of image-making in relation to the black woman in a way that transgresses the racist and sexist social strictures plaguing black women specifically with the revision of the black mother figure.

Instead of engaging the trope of motherhood to further disenfranchise the black woman, these four writers illustrate agency in each of the seemingly powerless black female characters in three distinct areas of mothering—1) *mothering the community*; 2) *mothering babies*; and 3) *mothering the stomach*. Each mother character in Cary, Bambara, and Adichie's novels enacts her distinct brand of motherhood through one of these three distinct categories. Emecheta's characters demonstrate elements of all three.

*Mothering the community* focuses specifically on the radical actions of black women beyond their immediate families that resist social disenfranchisement and protect or nurture the larger community in a way that complicates the traditional model of the expectations of black women and black mothers. Chapter two demonstrates the way *mothering the community* manifests in

*Those Bones Are Not My Child*. The main mother character Marzala's mother identity is integral to her protecting her community against the stigmatization and marginalization projected onto them by law enforcement and local government. *Mothering babies* encompasses the generation of innovative, non-traditional modes of caring for progeny that reclaims the mother's autonomy and resists mothering disenfranchisement. Chapter three includes the use of this concept in a discussion of Cary's *The Price of a Child* and the main character Mercer Gray's unconventional journey to literal and mothering freedom. Mercer wrests power from motherhood that allows her to lead herself and two of her children away from enslavement.

*Mothering the stomach* focuses on the use of food to educate, nurture, and demonstrate power especially in scenarios where a family or community has been denied access to provisions. Chapter four examines the way Adichie includes elements of *mothering the stomach* through two of her mother characters, Ifeoma and Beatrice. Ifeoma embodies *mothering the stomach* in a way that nourishes and saves members of her family from intense physical and emotional abuse. Adversely, Beatrice exhibits the concept in a violent manner that still ultimately removes the toxic, abusive presence from her home. These dynamics continue a tradition of resistance for the Africana woman. Their employment revises the prototypical mother identity. This study in no way asserts that motherhood is negative. Instead, I assert that the ideal characterization of the mother is controlled by hegemonic patriarchy and is, thus, limited and restrictive in its prevailing classification. These mother characters resist that.

Although the constraint of prescribed mothering is not solely assigned to black women, historically, black women have been overwhelmingly bombarded with the roles of nurses, maids, cooks, and caregivers—all jobs traditionally associated with motherhood. These writers

simultaneously dismantle the limited consideration of mothers while embracing the potential to empower through acts of mothering with their characters.

Despite existing and writing at different times and from different spaces, all four of the authors—Buchi Emecheta, Lorene Cary, Toni Cade Bambara, and Chimamanda Adichie—illustrate the manifestation of mothering in communities of the African diaspora as sites of intentional resistance. Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1983), Cary’s *The Price of A Child* (1996), Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (2000), and Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2012) all incorporate black maternal characters who demonstrate remarkable tenacity that resists the oppressive expectation for black women to submit to mothering that does not aid them or their communities.

The choice to focus on Nigeria as a transnational counterpart to black mothering experiences in the United States is rooted in the deep history of Nigerian women exhibiting resistance through instances that model the three thematic aspects of mothering in this study. There are moments in both Emecheta and Adichie’s texts that reference historic moment of gender rebellion and mothering activism such as the Women’s War of 1929 when thousands of Igbo women from Calabar, Owerri and the surrounding areas “sat on<sup>1</sup>” district chiefs appointed by the British crown in protest of special taxes being imposed on market women. My mention of this historicity points to a long “history of articulating deeply held grievances and effecting change through women’s embodied demonstration” that existed in Nigeria mirroring mothering activism formations in United States happening at the same time (Matera 1). This historical moment invokes both *mothering the community* as well as *mothering the stomach*.

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<sup>1</sup> “When ‘sitting on a man’ women danced and sang until the object of their grievance acknowledged his offense and promised to make restitution” (Matera 1).

The Ogu Umunwaanyi or Women's War in Nigeria "marked a historical high point in West African resistance to colonialism" (1). This protest links to Emecheta's Nnu Ego and the unnamed vegetable hawkers in Adichie's text as well as the *mothering the stomach* concept considering the market women relied upon the sale of their products to sustain their families while the larger community depended on the market women for various elements of daily life—most namely food. The proposal to impose steeper taxes on these women not only threatened their ability to mother within their families, it challenged the entire community's access to the nourishment they provided with their edible wares and "mother wit" (2). Thus, the women's agency against the colonial status quo who sought to repress their economic autonomy also represents *mothering the community*.

Many theorists have cued in on the substantial role Nigerian women have played in shifting cultural and political paradigms. Awe Bolanie's *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, Nina Emma Mba's *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria*, and Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome's *Globalization, Feminism, and Power: An African Perspective* all represent an engagement with Nigerian female autonomy grasped through various means. The prevalence of texts such as these points to the validity of asserting women's power in the postcolonial nation.

While women in Nigeria were using their collective power to wage war against imperialist and patriarchal oppression by *mothering the stomach* and *mothering the community*, black women in the United States were exercising similar agency against their white female counterparts during the women's suffrage movement. The disenfranchisement of women in electoral politics impacted black women in far more nuanced ways in comparison to white women. Evidence of this was present in the manner in which black women and their issues were

purposely disregarded by those spearheading efforts to gain voting rights for women. Black women who dedicated themselves to the work of suffrage rights were shunned by black men who “were fearful of the social implications of empowering women” and alienated by white women who “were reluctant to advocate suffrage for Black women because of White supremacists within their ranks” (*In Search of Sisterhood* 56). As the result of this social isolation, black female activists formed their own organizations such as the Tuskegee Women’s Club and the Alpha Suffrage Club to host demonstrations that championed their cause and resisted the reductive and restricting stereotypes held by dominant culture about black women. Despite the burgeoning numbers of black women who were pursuing education and working in non-domestic positions, it was acknowledged that suffrage for black women would serve to drastically increase these numbers in a fashion that would allow the black woman to move beyond the bondage of domesticity. The struggle for suffrage in black women’s circles truly served as a striving for the shedding of trite characterization projected onto the demographic and embodied the essence of *mothering the community* as their work aided in the election of black representation in cities like Chicago, Illinois.

Their genuine desire to contribute in ways beyond childcare and cooking were thwarted amid the movement for women’s suffrage. Key figures like Ida B. Wells (founder of the Alpha Suffrage Club) were denigrated for exuding traits that moved her away from traditional mothering docility. When the Alpha Suffrage Club registered to participate in the 1913 Women’s Suffrage Parade organized by the all-white National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Wells and the other Alpha Suffrage Club members were told they “would not be able to march with the Whites” and that they “would have to march at the rear of the line” (*In Search of Sisterhood* 56). In spite of threats and discouragement, Wells, the Alpha

Suffrage Club, and other black women organizations such as Delta Sigma Theta sorority participated in the march. Bertha Campbell, a member of the latter group, noted having heard jeers from white men to “Go back to the kitchen” while dodging the items thrown at them by white, male bystanders (58). The remark from the white male bystanders represent attempts to fix black female identities to the vestiges of mammy and a conventional model of motherhood that contributed to the marginalization of an entire race. Wells defied the directives of the NAWSA and joined the white female Chicago delegation in the alphabetical position she and her club had been denied due to their race. Her insistence that her group would be recognized and not told how they could embody their identities is at the core of what the mother characters selected for this study perform.

As these historic moments and the black female resistance demonstrated during them depict, black mothering as activism has been born out of necessity. In “How Conflict Shapes Motherhood and Motherwork,” Tatjana Takševa and Arlene Sgoutas acknowledge that in times of social unrest and war, “mothers are often those who remain at the margins (those who lack public power and who are often the object of other people’s power), and one’s identity as a mother is habitually overlooked as a category of analysis” (Takševa 2). Focus on the effect of social atrocities on mothers and their ability to abide in that role is lacking. While dominant culture often fails to privilege the struggles of black mothers, black women and the black women writers in this project carve out a space for their voices and activism.

The works of Emecheta, Cary, Bambara, and Adichie demonstrate black women forcibly bearing a significant majority of the social burden of their race as well as their gender for the benefit of each of the larger groups. The expectation of black women to serve as support to the movements and machinations of other groups is largely bound up in the mother role. Black

women have redefined motherhood as it applies to their identities. This reimagining of such a traditional role performs a sophisticated resistance to the projected nurturing, seemingly non-threatening mother archetype and role for Africana women. This role projection supports the black woman's characterization as one who should bear the emotional and symbolic load of the two larger demographics (women and black people) before being allowed to consider the plight of their own identities.

All four authors produced their works at distinctly different times; however, due to the persistence of black female oppression, each writer continues the work of their black female literary and political predecessors. There is a chronological progression of black women writing about their social debasement within their respective communities in the works of these four women. As the earliest to produce her text, Emecheta lays the foundation for the inclusion of mothering within her text in a way that both indicts and privileges aspects of her cultural community. Cary's work comes at a heightened time of renewed racial tension in the United States. Published in 1996, *The Price of A Child* remembers elements of an actual nineteenth century historical moment when black women were prevented from being legal mothers while touching on themes present and plaguing black mothers in the mid-nineties such as the effect of unjust legislation on the ability to mother. Bambara takes a local tragedy where black children are disappeared and murdered and weaves in the historical trauma of Middle Passage kidnapping. She effectively links a municipal nightmare of the late 1970s and early 1980s to violent crimes against black bodies of over a century before. Adichie's contemporary text also houses themes that conjure up the deep memory the Diaspora has of neglect, abuse, and murder. While her characters live in the same time as her readers, the damage they suffer could exist at any time and any space touched by imperialism, cultural cleansing, and economic oppression.



What is remarkable about their work and what puts them in conversation is the inclusion of the black mother archetype. The black mothering identities within their texts symbolically dismantle the traditional boundaries of the role and, thus, shed the black woman of the burdens of her race and gender. The mother characters engage the subjugation of their identity on terms that they define for themselves. This casting off of the problems not distinct to black women across the Diaspora rejects traditional mothering expectations and allows for the black mothers of the texts (and their authors) to wrest positions of control typically unavailable to women of color.

Emecheta's work predates Adichie's by almost twenty-five years yet the connection between the black woman and childcare is traceable within the histories of both Nigeria and the United States in their work. The two disparate time periods of Nigeria represented in *Joys of Motherhood* and *Purple Hibiscus* depict patriarchal practices that consign women to child-bearing and rearing to maintain their usefulness within their insular family units as well as the larger society. Nnu Ego and Ifeoma are expected to care for their biological children in addition to the children of their relatives and others in their community. While the expectation for them to mother in a traditional way is oppressive to their individualism, their undertaking of the role allows them to resist a limited narrative.

*The Joys of Motherhood* and *Purple Hibiscus* both demonstrate the way motherhood simultaneously oppresses and liberates women in patriarchal communities in Nigeria. Main characters Nnu Ego and Ifeoma each wrest power through the same identity (motherhood) that leaves them unable to eat, travel, and work at times. Yet, these characters, through their connections to their children, boldly lead microcosmic movements that challenge the forces that threaten their communities and lives.

The two American narratives demonstrate a similar dynamic. In American history and society, black women have been forced to care for white families and children—first during slavery and, then, by force of social repression. This reality has recently been romanticized in popular white-authored narratives such as Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009) and Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* (2001). These texts gained so much acclaim that both were adapted into films—furthering contributing to the pervasiveness of the images upheld in their narratives. The primary image in both was that of black women willfully caring for white children and families.

Despite civil and social progress, the concept of black women’s usefulness being tied to caregiving, cooking, and nurturing persists. As descendants of enslaved women brought to the New World during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, black women in America have never been able to shed the characterization as those who should care for others—firstly and predominately children. Mass media is overwrought with commercials featuring jovial and often overweight black women who embody the ideal of the mammy as they peddle cleaning products and fried chicken in a contemporary shell. *The Price of A Child* opens by orienting the reader to Ginnie’s utility as a breeder for her master Jackson Pryor. Although he allows her to be educated and considers her his “girl,” she gives birth to children who also become his property and increase his wealth (*The Price* 11). The comfort she provides is not only sexual, but economic for Pryor. Set over a century later, *Those Bones* centers on Marzala (Zala) Spencer’s role as a mother being challenged by law enforcement and city officials after her oldest child goes missing. Ginnie and Marzala lose children in the midst of their battles to be mothers in insular black communities oppressed by white supremacy. In both texts, dominant culture attempts to force both Ginnie

and Zala back into the limited and accepted representation of black motherhood. The characters work throughout the text to shed this unjust projection and gain control of their social existences.

The resistance of each of the mother characters in these texts has real life implications. All of the fictional mothers are based on real-life mothers with which the text's author bears a connection. Nnu Ego obviously resembles Emecheta's own mothering experience as an Igbo woman who raises her children away from her insular family and mostly without the support of their father. Of the character, Emecheta wrote, "in *The Joys of Motherhood* I created a woman, Nnuego, who gave all her energy, all her money and everything she had to raise her kids. She chopped wood for sale, she dealt on the black market, she did everything except whore herself to raise money" (*Head Above Water* 225). Like her character, Emecheta is forced to create an enterprise for herself that will support her and her children. Her work, like Nnu Ego, influences generations who come after her.

Cary's main character is also based on a real mother. Cary lived in a different time and did not personally know the mother who inspired her to create Mercer Gray. Mercer is a derivative of the formally-enslaved mother Jane Johnson. Johnson successfully liberated herself and two of her children from chattel slavery in 1855. With the majority of her work focused on the social emancipation of black people, Cary channels Johnson and resurrects her in *The Price of A Child*.

Bambara crafts a character that draws from her own matrilineal heritage. *Those Bones'* Marzala is affectionately referred to as Zala throughout the text. Zala is also the name of Bambara's great aunt who she credits with exposing her and the other young people in her family to various elements of black history and culture. Bambara's Aunt Zala takes it upon herself to prepare children she did not physically birth for the challenges of possessing black identity in the

Western world. Her embrace of the children in her extended family and her insistence on their cultural competency transcended beyond the realm of traditional mothering.

Ifeoma of *Purple Hibiscus* possesses a strong connection Adichie's mother experience. The aunt of the text's main persona is named for Adichie's own mother—Grace Ifeoma Adichie. The character bears a striking resemblance to the author's mother as both are university employees. The significance of both the fictional and real-life Ifeoma speaks to their mothering activism. Adichie's mother served as the first female registrar of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. By Adichie's own admission, her mother's presence in that role provided an image of motherhood and womanhood that challenged the prominent representations of the female roles and responsibilities she witnessed in her community. In her response to a friend's inquiry about how she could successfully raise a daughter with a proper example of feminist agency, Adichie advises her girlfriend to “be a full person...do not define yourself solely by motherhood” (*Dear Ijeawele* 7-8). The author goes on to dismantle the belief that traditional motherhood in Igbo culture means that the mother should not work outside the home in offering that, “a double-income family is actually the true Igbo tradition because not only did mothers farm and trade before British colonialism, trading was exclusively done by women in some parts of Igboland (9). Aunt Ifeoma's occupation as a university professor in *Purple Hibiscus* affects her method of mothering her three children as well as her niece and nephew. The character also thoughtfully serves as a maternal figure for many of her female students who are deeply affected by the perils of the traditional and repressive prescribed roles of women in their society.

As the result of their daring approach to being mothers to the children in their worlds, Nnu Ego, Mercer, Marzala, and Ifeoma redefine the role “from a conservative definition of mothering as a biological destiny to mothering as a liberating practice” (Gumbs xv). Their mothering

practice moves beyond biology. It also liberates beyond them—into their larger families and communities. At moments in each text, entire communities benefit from each woman’s practice of revolutionary motherhood.

The scholarship surrounding representations of resistant mothering in literature follows feminist ideologies that resist reductive considerations of mothering and motherhood. Feminist theorist Ketu H. Katrak calls for a more accurate definition of mothering that moves the role away from essential womanhood into a realm that allows for the “socially, even economically-constructed” reality of the role and acknowledges that biological mothering exists as a “socially grounded” actuality (275, 278). Loretta Ross argues that “women are socialized (not created) to care for others” and radically defines mothering as “the glad gifting of one’s talents, ideas, intellect, and creativity to the universe without recompense” (Gumbs xv). Both Katrak and Ross acknowledge the significant role socialization plays in defining and controlling motherhood. Ross moves beyond to suggest that the act of mothering—especially for women of color—exists as a radical, revolutionary act. Her consideration advances the effects of mothering beyond children, beyond traditional roles, and into the universe. Her thoughts release the role of mothering and its subjects from the shackles of social expectation.

Despite the voluminous feminist conversations surrounding the issues of black women especially as it associates to mothering, feminism has been a difficult endeavor for African women. This is largely due to the dualism of race and culture versus gender with which black women across the Diaspora have to contend. Amber E. Kinser describes dualisms as concepts that “afford one social group higher status and more power than another” (10). Resistance movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century in Africa and beyond called for women to place their gender-specific concerns on hold with the promise that there would be time for them

once the race gained social power. As the Diaspora expanded at the hands of the transatlantic slave trade and African women took on a new national identity in America, black women were forced to contend with liberation movements that required them to forget their gender oppression or the intersectionality of their race with gender issues.

Black feminists confront two separate dualisms in their fight for feminine autonomy. The first is the contempt for feminist ideology in African and African American communities. Feminism has not been welcomed in the fight for black liberation. The imposed social duty of African women which is “conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence” burdens black women with the responsibility of retreating from issues directly linked to their distinct needs in order to support the issues of the larger group (Petersen 253). Thus, black women become metaphoric mules in relation to the struggle for social justice.

As the result of this disdain for feminism in the discussion of black freedom movements, black female identities have been relegated into a social silo. This marginal positioning not only disregards the diverse needs of the black female community. It also has historically forced black women into a role of support for other liberation movements—burdening them with the expectation of forgetting their desire for freedom for the benefit of the freedom of others and making them “the mules of the world” (Walker 237).

The consideration of feminism as a Western concept has also denied African women agency and further relegated the demographic into a support position for the emancipation of others. Thus, the second dualism with which black feminists must contend is that of white or Western feminism versus black feminism. The issues focused upon by the first and second waves of feminism such as suffrage, property rights, and equality in the work place ignored the social realities and debased positions of black women who needed access to more basic rights. Black

women writers such as Alice Walker responded to this dualism with reimagined formations of the feminist movement that focused specifically on black women's liberation. Walker coined *womanism* and described the movement as one with deep roots in the racial and gender-based oppression of black women specifically. *Womanism* possesses a foundation in the most practical manifestations of the black female community—motherhood being one.

Prioritizing motherhood as a tool for liberation is inherently feminist. This proves problematic for black women and black motherhood given the history between black women and the feminist movement. Kirsten Holst Petersen articulates that there are nuances of feminist discourse within African culture and asserts African feminism as distinctly disparate from that of its white, Western counterpart. The departure between the two schools of thought focused on female autonomy exists as the result of women of African descent bearing the burden of racial inequality amid their gender inequity. This complicated component of the black feminist movement forces black women across the African diaspora to grapple with which struggle they must contend in an effort to attain social freedom—race or gender. To this end, Petersen questions, “which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism?” (Petersen 252). The implication is that black women cannot choose. The choice is made for them by members of demographics with more social power. The prescription is that black women must contend with both aspects of their social and cultural identities simultaneously or not at all.

Engaging black motherhood as a diasporic entity is further complicated by the disparate realities of black women on the continent of Africa and that of black women in the West. African womanist Chikwenye Ogunyemi holds that Western “feminism and African American womanism/feminism overlook African peculiarities” and, thus, cannot connect in a useful way to

emancipate African women (Arndt 711). As the result of this belief, Chikwenye maintains that “only African women may be African womanists” (711). So, the fight for black female autonomy possesses intersectional schisms.

Afro Caribbean writer and filmmaker Owen Alik Shahadah argues that feminism exists as a strictly western paradigm that is “diabolically anti-African anti-human neologism emerging out of the Eurocentric reactionary women’s movement in the 50’s” (Shahadah). Nigerian-Finnish writer Minna Salami opposes sentiments such as Shahadah’s arguing that “critics don’t even bother to understand what African feminism is about before attacking it” (Salami). Further complicating the discussion of feminism among black women, there are African women who support challenging traditional gender roles and constraints that persist across the many cultures of the continent who feel their struggle is wholly disparate from African American women. Engaging with both African and African American works penned by women from both global spaces hinged on the trope of mothering acknowledges the African feminist problem as well as the intersectionality of black female identities and reveals the pattern of organized resistance to oppression present in the experiences of both groups of women.

Sherri Barnes notes that “as black women have become cognizant of the multiple systemic forces of oppression, they have pursued collective actions for social change, transforming society and themselves through their own agency and self-determination” (Barnes). Revolutionary mothering practices exist as one of the many responses black women have employed to subvert race and gender limitations and oppression. Within each of the four novels, the socially-constructed and historically propagated archetype of the black mother symbolically dismantles the traditional boundaries of the role and, thus, shed the black woman of the burdens of her race and gender.



Black women have long fought for their social freedoms. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both Nigeria and the United States were ridden with the weight of imperialism and Jim Crow, respectively. These social atrocities plagued black communities in tremendous ways; however, black women suffered a particular hell at the hands of the white supremacy and patriarchy that fueled repressive systems. Black female activists as early as the early 1800s found that their abolition work was wrought with the weight of also having to advocate specifically for the liberation of the black woman and the roles assigned to them by society. In 1830, Maria Stewart indicted “both whites and black men who discriminated against and/or refused to aid African American women whose talents—and too often their sexual virtue—were buried in ‘performing mean, servile, labor’” (*Ida: A Sword Among Lions* 84). Black women in America were isolated even in the struggle against enslavement according to Stewart. As the result of this type of disenfranchisement, formations of black feminine power asserted themselves in both Nigeria and the United States.

I classify these revolutionary acts of African women that challenged racist, sexist, and classist oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as mother agency that precedes the publication of each of the texts discussed in the coming chapters. This resolve warrants an association to mothering activism for its unique methods of resisting dominant power structures—methods traditionally associated with the social roles forced upon black women. Nigeria’s Women’s War of 1929 and the formation of black female organizations such as the Alpha Suffrage Club in America are emblematic of this agency.

Other scholars have cued in on the dominant presence of the mothering trope in literature of the African Diaspora. Most underscore how dominant culture limits black female identities with a reductive consideration of black motherhood and how black women writers in particular use

the mothering trope to liberate communities and resist oppressive norms. Nancy Kang asserts that Western discourse makes generalizations about “Black women’s capacity to nurture and protect” based on characterizations like Mother Africa and Mammy (701). Her work on Afro-Caribbean Canadian writers’ texts argues that literature of the African Diaspora venerates black motherhood and “casts them as ‘more-than<sup>2</sup>’ mothers” in a way that resists the stifled mischaracterizations existent in dominant discourse (Kang 701).

Olayiwola Abiodun and Adekunle Olowonmi discuss the approach of African women writers who include black mother characters in their texts as one that “takes issue with the collapse of social inequalities and its potentially disastrous implications” and provides a tool for struggle through black mothering (141). Christine Gomez points out that women writers in the Black community “work toward dismantling traditional stereotypes of Black Motherhood, particularly the Black superwoman stereotype, and, thereby, ultimately redefining Black womanhood” in their writing and inclusion of mother characters (186). Lillian Osaki notes that the fundamental reason mothering possesses such a dominant position in literature of the Diaspora is linked to the vital role motherhood occupies in the black community. Osaki states, “Motherhood is important among African American communities because of the position that African American mothers have assumed in the survival of black people, their history, and culture”—connecting the frequency of the mothering trope in literature to the very survival of black people (22).

Stephanie Li positions black mothering especially within neo-slave narratives as a complex yet necessary inclusion because of the enslaved woman’s provisional access to her children. Li asserts that the enslaved black woman’s insistence to possess a connection to her offspring “must

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<sup>2</sup> “More-than” works as an adjective to suggest mothering to an overt, specialized, or superlative degree (Kang 701).

be understood as a complex negotiation involving individual agency, resistance, and power” (14). Ultimately, literary critics of African and African American literature converge on the notion that black mothering is both under siege and positioned to resist.

My work furthers this idea by connecting two diasporic communities and demonstrating the nuances of the black mothering practices in these spaces through the specific subthemes of *mothering the community*, *mothering babies*, and *mothering the stomach*. The inclusion of these three areas is intended to demonstrate the sophistication and codedness of black mothering practice. I hope to acknowledge that while all black mothering resists due to the social repressions that hinder black identities and communities, there are a variety of applications to this particular mode of resistance.

Noting the varied nature that black mothering takes on in the texts within this project, I link the four women writers and their four texts with the theme of black female resistance employed through artistic expression with the use of Nina Simone’s “Four Women.” A mother, writer, and black woman who lived in both the southern United States and west Africa<sup>3</sup> during some of the most tumultuous times for black people in both spaces, Simone penned many works that resisted the social constraints that limited black liberation. The inclusion of “Four Women” and Nina Simone in this project assists in the construction of a theoretical bridge between activism and art that is both generational and geographic in nature.

In 1965, at the height of movements centered on obtaining civil rights for black people in America and independence for black nations across the continent of Africa, Nina Simone recorded “Four Women.” The short song voices the experiences of four women who, despite their disparate histories, all suffer from social debasement for their identity as black women in a

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<sup>3</sup> Simone was born and lived as a child in North Carolina during segregation. She maintained a residence in Liberia and, upon her death, her ashes were spread across many African countries.

racist society. The four personas in the song, Aunt Sara, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches are described as black, yellow, tan, and brown, respectively. These seemingly basic labels superficially speak of the archetypal women's skin tones; however, deeper analysis points to the acknowledgement of the variety of intersections that exist among black female identities.

At the time "Four Women" was produced and performed, Simone was performing across the United States in response to an amalgam of social issues. "Four Women" was written "partly to expose the color caste system" in the US—linking the country to diasporic and postcolonial counterparts with similar systems of oppression and underscoring all of the implications skin color had for black women's positions in that society and culture (Loudermilk 125). The music that Simone began to produce and perform to resist racism, sexism, and other oppressive systems was met by harsh criticism by many who felt the artist was overstepping a boundary as a black female musician. Not only do the characters in "Four Women" possess different shades of skin, their hair varies between "woolly," "long," and "fine" (Simone). Despite the differences in their appearances, the women described in the song's lyrics share the most unfortunate aspects of their existence. Aunt Sarah's "back is strong" allowing her to "take the pain/inflicted again and again" (Simone). Saffronia feels trapped "between two worlds" as the result of being the offspring of a black mother who was raped by a man who was "rich and white" (Simone). Sweet Thing questions her worth and acknowledges the commodification of her identity in asking "Whose little girl am I?" and noting she belongs to "anyone who has money to buy" (Simone). Lastly, Peaches forcefully threatens to "kill the first mother I see" because her "life has been rough" as the direct result of her parents or ancestors having been enslaved (Simone). What each of the women have in common besides their black female identity is the role white supremacist culture plays in the subjugation of their identities.

Within Simone's lyrical narrative, these women do not know one another. They even seem to represent distinctly different historical eras; although, it is difficult to adequately place them because of the ongoing mistreatment of black female bodies across history. It is only at the end of each woman's stanza that we learn what she is called and what she is called is not her name. This further connotes that their individual and collective usefulness is associated with how others see and use them and their bodies—Aunt Sarah works; Saffronia symbolizes white patriarchal privilege; Sweet Thing strokes male egos as associated to sexual dominance; and Peaches proves that black women are dangerous and angry when left to her own devices. In this one song, Simone demonstrates the misconceptions and connections between black women regardless of the social and physical space they inhabit.

Linking this larger analysis with Simone's work is significant for many reasons. The song is categorized as soul or gospel—both genres crafted and repurposed by black communities in the US to resist oppressive situations and structures. Like black mothers who resist through acts of mothering, Simone reimagines her music to perform activism and embeds resistance within a song seemingly about the delinquency and subservience of black women. Similar to the characters within her song, the singer's career was initially shaped to entertain white masses and serve their interests. Music like "Four Women" is in the realm of the music that made her popular, yet it weaves in a metanarrative of universal oppression of and resistance by black women in America and across the Diaspora.

With "Four Women," Simone achieves the projection of resistance within a shell of ostensibly harmless social expectation. The song provides an introduction for the four authors who represent four decades and continue the tradition of black female resistance embodied in social roles crafted by white patriarchy to repress their identities. The four authors focused upon

in this study illustrate resistance expressly through the repurposing of projected maternal roles. As all four women in Simone's song resist the labels branded upon their social identity, all four authors resist the limitations placed on black mothering.

While there is no comparison of oppression, I engage the ways that patriarchy has structured motherhood to limit women and how that construction is further oppressive to black women regardless of national context. This dynamic is demonstrated with the discussion of instances of resistance by black mothers in the texts of the four black women writers from two separate global spaces. The analysis in the following chapters challenges the way we perceive and acknowledge motherhood and mothering by privileging the way these writers embed resistance to social repression in the actions of the four mothers<sup>4</sup> in their texts. The characters highlighted in these chapters negotiate the challenges of a role that in its traditional and accepted definition separates them from progress and autonomy.

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<sup>4</sup> Nne Anò—Igbo for “four mothers” to constitute this study of four women writers as a study of four women of African descent who birth work centered on mothering

**CHAPTER 2**  
**#NOTYOURMULE: MOTHERING THE COMMUNITY IN *THOSE BONES ARE NOT MY CHILD***

The first concept of mothering as a model for liberation—*mothering the community*—shares significant traits with the last persona in Nina Simone’s “Four Women,” Peaches. The final verse of Simone’s song references the trauma of the black experience in the United States being grounded in chattel slavery when the lyrics read, “I’m awfully bitter these days/because my parents were slaves” (Simone). These lines towards the end of the verse, contextualize the pain evoked throughout the verse and link the sentiments of the entire song to the experiences of black women across the Diaspora. Peaches very literally invokes community as she shares her frustrations about navigating her black female identity.

Both Peaches and Marzala (Zala) of Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child* demonstrate *mothering the community*. *Mothering the community* considers the radical actions of black women beyond their immediate families that resist social disenfranchisement and protect or nurture the larger community in a way that complicates the traditional model of the expectations of black women and black mothers. Although Peaches makes no claim to motherhood, she does express care for mothers. She mentions being enraged because of the mistreatment of her own mother. She is bitter because she is the progeny of enslaved parents. Considering the distinct atrocities endured by enslaved black women specifically, Peaches’ rage is distinctly linked to her mother’s condition of suffering and denial of the opportunity to mother. Peaches sets the tone for the resistance to the stifling social expectations of black women. Zala

represents the model of a black mother who employs mothering agency to not only safeguard her family but to reclaim her community's autonomy and dignity.

In the last moments of "Four Women," Simone croons,

*My skin is brown*

*My manner is tough*

*I'll kill the first mother I see*

*My life has been too rough*

*I'm awfully bitter these days*

*Because my parents were slaves*

*What do they call me*

*My name is Peaches*

This verse ends Simone's ode to the nuances of black female identities with conviction and purpose. While Peaches' brief narration of her life struggles and experiences follows the pattern of the three previous verses, she possesses a tone that departs from the characterizations of Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, and Sweet Thing in the three previous verses. Her tone is markedly more pointed and vexed than the song's previous personas and her melodic narrative is unapologetically confrontational. Peaches is clear about the impetus for her abrasive demeanor. She is angry about the plight of her ancestors as black people in America and how their oppression affects her present condition. She tells the listener that she is bitter and violently furious "because my parents were slaves" (Simone). In this confession, Peaches justifies her behavior. Her tough manner, murderous tendencies, and bitterness are all a response to the severe disenfranchisement of black people.



Peaches' frantic, frustrated, and direct delivery mimics the general tone that cloaks a great deal of Bambara's narrative in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. In *Those Bones*, Bambara writes about a community who suffers disregard and mischaracterization by dominant culture during its most trying and tragic time. At the beginning of the 676-page, posthumously-published work, the reader is introduced to Marzala (Zala) Spencer through a lengthy, first-person prologue. In the prologue, Zala recounts the last several months of her community's struggle with having several of their children abducted or murdered. She presents harsh realities and composes conspiracy theories that implicate Atlanta's law enforcement, media, and more economically-privileged communities in the crimes against the low-income, black Atlanta community and their children.

In the opening lines of *Those Bones* and the final verse of "Four Women," both Zala and Peaches are angry and palpably so. Both women express distinct frustration at what most might feel more comfortable just ignoring. In the song, Peaches vehemently indicts society for its persisting injustice towards black people. In Simone's live performances of this piece, her voice is as rough as Peaches' lines. Peaches' verse is filled with a similar pain to the three preceding verses yet there is something far more aggressive. Her admittance to being willing to "kill the first mother<sup>5</sup>" and being "awfully bitter these days" is disturbing to hear (Simone). The styling of the verse does not soothe. It is abrupt and unsettling.

Like Peaches, Zala speaks about controversial realities that are present for black communities and overlooked by dominant society. In the prologue and throughout *Those Bones*, the character laments the mistreatment of her low-income, black Atlanta community and vents her frustrations with law enforcement and media narratives that diminish their realities and fears

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<sup>5</sup> In this lyric, the implication of "mother" is that it is short for the expletive "motherfucker"—someone who harms mothers. It is significant that Peaches wants them dead.

about the rash of child abductions and murders pillaging their neighborhoods. These dominant entities even work to convince the suffering families that the kidnappings and murders are past concerns and that their fears are unwarranted—completely denying the truth of their realities.

Acknowledging the dismissive manner in which local law enforcement and media treat the concerns of Zala and her neighbors, the character cynically quips, “The terror is over, the authorities say. The horror is past, they repeat every day. There’ve been no new cases of kidnap and murder since the arrest back in June. You’ve good reason to know that the official line is a lie” (*Those Bones* 3). Zala distrusts the authorities and uses her storytelling and actions to indict their mistreatment of her community. Her suspicions about the status quo power structure’s mindful disregard for her community indict white supremacy in a similar way to Peaches who points to the institution of slavery as the impetus for her plight and anger.

Peaches justifies her action and rage with the loss she has suffered. In like fashion, Zala rationalizes her renegade continuance of the movement to bring the child murderer to justice with her own suffering. Peaches’ verse states that the systemic disenfranchisement of black people prevents her progress. Zala, as the mother of an abducted child, is convinced that law enforcement and the official narrative of the Atlanta Child Murders<sup>6</sup> manipulate the experiences of her community—leading to further trauma. When law enforcement proclaims that the horrific epidemic has ended, Zala and her neighbors are still working to protect their children as they are still disappearing and dying. Like Peaches’ anger and frustration, Zala’s emotions extend beyond her personal experience to incorporate an entire community of black people who have been marginalized and ignored. Both of their raw accounts accomplish what theorist Carolyn

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<sup>6</sup> The Atlanta Child Murders were a series of kidnappings and murders of young black people committed in Atlanta, Georgia between 1979 and 1981.

Gerald contends black art should work to achieve—“putting a bold eye on an uncomfortable reality” in a manner that does not allow the reader or listener to overlook the atrocities perpetrated on black identities and communities (Gerald 204).

The lyrics that Simone writes for Peaches coupled with her intense tone mirrors the frenzied first pages of Bambara’s *Those Bones*. Although Zala does not threaten to “kill the first mother” she sees, she is outraged and convinced of her mission against the mistreatment of her community by dominant culture. While Zala is not intentionally or vindictively violent, she is limitless in her pursuit of justice for her community and family as she threatens the silencing Atlanta’s law enforcement, media, and privileged communities have orchestrated regarding the child murders.

Throughout the text, stereotypical, patriarchal figures such as “the paddling male gym teacher” who criticizes Zala as “unladylike” for leading a walkout during PTA meeting at her children’s school denigrate her agency further disenfranchising the entire community (*Those Bones* 5). Just as an audience might cringe at Peaches’ delivery and candor, law enforcement as well as members of the larger Atlanta community scoff at and disavow Zala’s wild-eyed determination to continue the mission to locate her missing son and solve the cases of other missing and murdered black children. Neither woman complies with the social expectation of their race or gender to stay silent or be blindly agreeable.

Toni Cade Bambara shares similar traits to Zala. Both Bambara and Zala are mothers who raise their children in Atlanta, Georgia and credit their devotion to their children as the inspiration for how their community activism manifests. Atlanta is Bambara’s motherland. The New York-born author explains her matrilineal link to the southern city as follows: “my people

are from Atlanta. My mama's folks are from Atlanta" (Bonetti 45). Her concern for the black people of Atlanta grows out of her devotion to her own mother.

The way Zala observes and documents her experiences in her community are reminiscent of Bambara's narration style in her essay "Deep Sight and Rescue Missions" in her 1996 essay collection *Deep Sightings & Rescue Missions*. In this eclectic text, Bambara underscores "the necessity of countering propaganda and deprogramming the indoctrinated" (147). Much of Zala's activism in *Those Bones* centers on debunking the agitprop constructed against her community. Both women are, in essence, on a rescue mission for their identity, their families, and their community. Their insight into the circumstances surrounding the pain experienced by black people in their worlds goes beyond the surface; it is deep. As the result, both Zala and Bambara channel Peaches in their audacious and unabashed assertions regarding the aspects of dominant culture that endanger the people they live among and love.

Bambara is just as skeptical and resentful of the stories produced about black people, communities, and cultures by hegemonic scholars, historians, and storytellers as Zala is about the narrative put forth about her community and family by the media and law enforcement officials covering the Atlanta Child Murders. The novel's title serves as a constant reminder to the reader to question the narratives crafted by the dismissive purveyors of cultural fallacies. The title *Those Bones Are Not My Child* literally communicates that the black community will not accept the stories and identities forced upon them about what they produce and who the community will become. Bambara's thoughtful treatment of the story of the Atlanta Child Murders and her main character's struggle against the misnomers that prevent justice for her family and community deny the dominant culture its privilege of projecting negative and unsavory characteristics on the

black community. In this way, the black communities within and beyond the text reject being treated as metaphoric mules.

Bambara alleges that mainstream media, as the result of being predominately controlled by wealthy white men, intentionally promotes a “basic dualism that permeated social, educational, political, economic, cultural, and intimate life” in America (*Deep Sightings* 163). She refers to this duality as a “demonic model” that, among other things, marginalizes black people with hierarchies holding, for example, that if “we are ordained,” then “you are damned” and if “we are autonomous and evolved,” then “you are shiftless, unhinged, underdeveloped, primitive, savage, dependent, criminal, a menace to public safety, needy wards and clients” (163). Bambara’s critique of this duality and its attack on black communities and identities embodies a simultaneous acknowledgement of and resistance to the black community as a metaphoric mule.

Other black female literary artists such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker reference the tendency of dominant culture to project unsavory traits such as violence, drug addiction, criminality, and poverty onto black communities and people with their work. Alice Walker’s mention of the black community and black women specifically as metaphoric mules invokes Nanny from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who eloquently theorizes that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see”—offering a profound conceptualization of social roles based upon race and gender projected onto black women (Hurston 14). Walker employs the adage to contend that the ideal image for the black woman possesses fundamental grounding in the notion that black women have been literally and figuratively “handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry” (Walker 237). This dynamic renders black women, such a large and heterogeneous cultural group, as

prejudicially limited and controlled. Bambara's mode of storytelling and her creation of Zala as an empowered mother figure reject the prevailing problematic narratives of child neglect and villainy thrust onto the black community through the coverage of the Atlanta Child Murders.

As an animal that is bred specifically to bear physical burdens, the mule's association to black community performs two interrelated dynamics. First, it points to the manipulation of the narratives focused on what is believed and communicated about black people. Second, it demonstrates that these narratives exist as intentionally manufactured to bind black people to characteristics that the dominant culture wants to disavow. The metaphoric mule's association to this aspect of disenfranchisement of the black community moves beyond literature into other realms where narratives are generated—media and entertainment. It also encompasses more than white supremacist considerations of black identities.

Depiction of black communities and cultures as the world's mules have recently experienced a renewed life in popular culture. Amid the recent protests of the Academy Awards for the lack of equity in the roles written, produced, and nominated for recognition for black actors, a group of non-black people of color asserted distaste for the seemingly exclusionary demonstrations that championed more inclusion for black culture with no mention of other non-white groups (i.e. Asian, Latino, Native American, etc.). After the awards ceremony's host, Chris Rock's, controversial opening monologue, certain viewers took to their social media accounts to decry his failure to mention non-black people of color in his bevy of satirical jokes focused on black empowerment and solidarity.

One such critic posted to Twitter, "When will [@chrisrock](#) bring up Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American actors and opportunity?"—alluding to the notion that the black comedian continued the Academy's restrictive practices by only speaking to the disparities in

roles and nominations for black actors (Workman). Members of the Black Twitter<sup>7</sup> community responded to this critique of Rock's performance with the hashtag #NotYourMule. Retorting to the litany of tweets delegitimizing Rock's words, Mikki Kendall posted, "Someone tell me not to do a #NotYourMule tag about the expectation that Black people take all the risk to advance representation in media" and "Solidarity doesn't look like Black people taking the risks & everyone else reaping the rewards. #NotYourMule" in resistance to the insinuation that a movement to increase equity for the black community in any realm must incorporate other likeminded movements to possess legitimacy (Kabas).

#NotYourMule adopts and continues resistance to the troubled expectation of the black community as the sole bearer of the struggle against unjust social treatment in a manner that ignores the nuances of the community's particular needs. The popularity of the hashtag and Twitter as the vehicle used to advance awareness surrounding the issue it engages demonstrates a diasporic connection that is archived within the social networking site. Linking this contemporary digital discourse to its literary predecessors, Kendall acknowledges Zora Neale Hurston's fiction in the generation of the #NotYourMule hashtag.

Connecting the subjugated experience of people of the African Diaspora to the symbolic laborious identity of beasts of burden is not novel. The black community in *Those Bones* is forced to carry the burden of loss and guilt for all of Atlanta. Throughout the text, the parents and neighbors of the kidnapped and murdered children are accused of incompetence, violence against themselves, child neglect, and innate deviance by law enforcement, media outlets, and city leadership. They are burdened with traits that should be assigned to the perpetrators of the

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<sup>7</sup> a cultural identity on the Twitter social network focused on issues of interest to the black community, particularly in the United States. Feminista Jones described it in *Salon* as "a collective of active, primarily African-American Twitter users who have created a virtual community ... [and are] proving adept at bringing about a wide range of sociopolitical changes

heinous crimes against their children; however, for the sake of preserving Atlanta's burgeoning identity as a progressive and prosperous international city, the black community is marginalized with the yoke of projected sinister tendencies.

In Simone's song, Peaches carries the burden of her ancestors which manifests into anger and violence. In Bambara's text, Zala further takes on the burden of finding her son Sundiata (Sonny) and rallying the community once they are abandoned by law enforcement and other status quo leadership. Although both female characters take on sizable emotional loads, they actively resist the deleterious projections forced onto the black community by white supremacist narratives. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is useful in contextualizing the projection of objectionable and negative traits onto the black community by dominant culture. Kristeva's Lacanian-inspired concept of abjection is defined as the "recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (Kristeva 248). Abjection or the expelling of the "Real" relates directly to primal repression or the manner in which individuals attempt to defend themselves against unwanted tendencies. The abject represents waste, failure, and all things undesirable. When dominant culture projects the black community as inherently criminal and incapable of sustaining themselves and their communities, it is considering those characteristics as waste, failure, and undesirable and, thus, deeming the black community as such. This act of expelling unwanted characteristics and designating the black community as abject, in turn, elevates dominant culture—defining it as everything opposite of the traits it rejects.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler describes abjection as "the way the dominant order excrementalizes its dispossessed" (Thomas 134). Kristeva uses the concept of abjection to assert that there are no natural human traits related to gender, race, sexuality or otherwise, but that the traits assigned to certain groups are the result of the expulsion of what has been deemed to be



waste or abject. Abjection theory illustrates the deeply embedded roots of racism, classicism, sexism, etc. The more one community is situated as disempowered, the closer that community is to the abject.

Though Bambara did not live to witness the publication of her magnum opus, her resilience as an advocate for black communities, women, and mothering persisted in her creation of *Zala*. Community plays a significant role in the author's writing as well as in the publication of her work. As her longtime friend and editor, Toni Morrison held that the aim of Bambara's writing was to achieve justice in stating, "her insights are multiple, her textures layered and her narrative trajectory implacable...there was no doubt whatsoever that the work she did had work to do. She always knew what her work was for" (ix). Bambara's writing not only evokes community, it is the beneficiary of it. Were it not for her intimate literary community made up of other black female writers, including Morrison, *Those Bones* may not have ever gone beyond an unfinished manuscript buried in the deceased author's personal files. It took the agency of others to see this manuscript, rumored to be over 1,800 pages at Bambara's untimely death, and its embedded message through to publication.

Although *Those Bones* tells the story of an actual crime against the black community in Atlanta during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bambara's telling of the event communicates a much more global narrative about the attack on black communities by crafting the abduction of Sundiata in a manner that is reminiscent of Middle Passage kidnap and embedding the paranoia of the black experience in each abduction report. *Those Bones* is not simply an historical account of this tragedy. It unpacks the ways dominant culture, law enforcement, and the economically elite simultaneously ignore the Atlanta's low socioeconomic black communities and projects its unwanted narratives onto the people it plagues most.

In a 1982 interview, while Bambara was still crafting the manuscript that would become *Those Bones*, the author shared her purpose and method for writing this true account within a fictional shell—admitting that her interest in telling the story of the Atlanta Child Murders centered on community. Bambara acknowledged that the majority, if not all, of the narratives that existed about the Atlanta Child Murders emanated from sources from outside of the community from which the children were taken. She claimed, “what we’ve gotten is the media story or the media version. We’ve gotten the police version but we’ve yet to get the domestic version or the community story” and that what would become *Those Bones* would exist as “the community story” (Bonetti 31).

Bambara’s fictional take on the story of the abduction and murder of over forty Atlanta young people is deliberate in honoring and protecting the affected community. The author felt that she could not justifiably speak for the experiences of the families and community that actually suffered the trauma. In her reconstruction of the historical moment, she refuses to use actual victim accounts to create her plot or characters. By taking this approach, the author avoids enacting epistemic violence on the community by rejecting the opportunity to tell their stories for them in a manner that invokes Gayatri Spivak’s canonical article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Spivak explains that socially-marginal communities possess their subjugated position as the result of being “marked out by this epistemic violence” at the hands of an often intellectual elite class (25). Acknowledging foundational theorists to situate her consideration of the question—*can the subaltern speak?*—, Spivak engages French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze’s assertion that “the oppressed, if given the chance [...] can speak and know their conditions” (25). This notion points to the existence of the problem of “the permission to narrate” that exists for disenfranchised communities (Spivak 25). Despite being an

accomplished writer and teacher, Bambara resists the identity of an elite intellectual who misappropriates the story of a community that does not possess her same social standing in the eyes of dominant culture. The author is mindful of the problematic occurrence of those with access attempting to tell the stories of those who are not held as worthy of intelligible and scholarly discourse and skillfully creates a space in which the voices of a marginalized community are not co-opted, but cherished.

The negation of narratives that fail to support the normative stories that shape national, regional, and cultural identities by dominant culture creates situations that quieten the voice of the disenfranchised masses. In *Those Bones*, Bambara amplifies the possible narratives of the marginalized Atlanta community by not assuming to fully understand their nuanced struggle. With this text, Bambara celebrates the dignity of a community whose story had been rendered virtually invisible and inaudible. She does not speak for them. She leaves open their opportunity to share their own tale while drawing attention to the fact that there is more to the story than media and law enforcement has admitted or acknowledged.

Bambara held that by creating Zala and the other characters in the work from her imagination as opposed to portraying real people, she could “lift up the community voice without hustling anybody; without bringing onstage actual people and putting words in their mouths or attributing motives to them that they may not have had when they made certain kind of public statements” (Bonetti 31). As a narrative, *Those Bones* includes “the combination of public statement by public figures” and the fictional conjuring of Bambara which the author contends provides her “a point of entry into the community story” (31). Bambara’s deliberate effort to honor the humanity and dignity of the real people who experienced the murderous terror on their community between 1979 and 1981 embodies the essence of *mothering the community* in that

she uses her talent to resist the monolithic imaging of Atlanta's low-income, black citizens maintained by law enforcement and mainstream media at the time. The author becomes a surrogate literary mother who disallows the inequitable portrayal of a community that she adopts as her own with her thoughtful consideration with how she crafts *Those Bones*.

Although Bambara does not give the novel its ultimate title, her actions in penning the text agree with the sentiment shared by Zala when she is summoned to identify the rescued Sundiata after his abduction—"those bones are not my child" (*Those Bones* 517). In these lines that double as the text's title, Zala denies that the shell of her son, "the damaged boy" law enforcement authorities present to her is her child (517). Just as Zala refuses to accept "the official erasure" of her community's horror and "the bogus official version of the Atlanta" that ignored their plight, she rejects what the predatory system that has taken her son has produced in him (573, 549). The frail being she sees is, in fact, Sonny, but the trauma he suffers at the hands of his abductors changes him and he is not her child in that moment. Bambara's treatment of the narrative and its players models this sentiment. She realizes that the predominant media story does not truthfully represent the suffering community. Bambara's work challenges the dominant narrative in the same way Zala pushes back against the inequitable portrayal of her community, her family, and her identity as a black mother.

As a writer, Bambara was direct about her impetus for the themes and topics she focused on in her fiction. In her essay "Salvation is the Issue," the author conveys her belief that the stories that are told about the black community possess the power to eliminate or preserve life. She maintains that "stories are important. They keep us alive" and that black writers and storytellers must bear this in mind as they create ("Salvation" 203). Bambara focuses her assertion on the black community because she considers the centuries of the systemic

disenfranchisement of black people as acts that threaten the continuance of the race. She aligns storytelling with resistance and shares that she learned the “importance of resistance tradition” while “hanging tough on the Speakers Corner with my mama” (203). For Bambara, resistance, storytelling, and the presence of maternal wisdom are all connected.

Bambara sought to save lives in a similar fashion to her main character Zala. The issue for producing the novel goes beyond simply telling a story. Bambara claims that when it comes to her writing, “the issue is salvation” and that she works “to produce stories that save our lives” (204). In *Those Bones*, she preserves the life of her late great aunt Zala by making her the namesake of the main character. Bambara’s great aunt is described by the author as a matriarchal force who took it upon herself to expose the family’s youth to the stories and figures of black historical significance. In *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, Bambara asserts that as others in her family and community sheltered her and her peers from the perils of black American identity, “Great Aunt Zala went right on opening the door to Robeson, Du Bois, Claudia Jones, Rose Garner, J.A. Rogers, the Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, the dockworkers, and members of the Ida B. Wells clubs. The woman would just not let us sleep” (168). Bambara’s aunt mothers the children of her family by exposing and educating them against the proliferation of pervasive lies that plague black identity in America. In the thoughtful creation of Zala as a mother who moves beyond her own children to challenge the dominant narrative attacking the entire community, Bambara honors her own matrilineal history. Naming Zala for her great aunt allows Bambara to pay homage to a mothering practice that personally benefitted her life. She also succeeds in preserving the truths of the community who suffered silencing and marginalization during a horrific moment.

Toni Morrison's concept of "the black woman as parent" as one of the key archetypes of African American literature is germane in considering both Zala as well as Bambara (Step 27). Morrison's consideration of this archetype moves motherhood beyond birthing and caring for children. It is defined by Morrison "not as a mother or father, but as a parent, as a sort of umbrella figure, culture-bearer, in that community with not just her children but all children" (27). This encapsulates the concept of *mothering the community* and describes Zala's actions in the text, Bambara's function within her work, and great Aunt Zala's inspiration for both women.

At the beginning of *Those Bones*, we learn that "from the start, the prime suspects in the Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children's Case were the parents" who were written as "monstrous parents" of "street-hustling young hoodlums" (5). The prologue is Zala's account of how the media narrative and law enforcement mischaracterizes her community in the midst of the missing and murdered children case. Her detailed description of the events, elements of her neighborhood, and the particulars of the case demonstrate her fight to absolve her community and its image of the abjection it suffers at the hands of mainstream media and disingenuous city leaders.

The disregard that Zala's community experiences at the hands of authorities charged with governing and protecting them forces the parents of the community to form the Committee to Stop Children's Murders (STOP). In the prologue, Bambara writes Zala's reflection of the treatment of the parents who are subjected to numerous polygraphs and painted as "not above suspicion" by local and national law enforcement assigned to the case (*Those Bones* 6). As Zala ruminates over the common mistreatment of the parents when their children's bodies are found, Bambara highlights the manner in which the official investigation shows indifference towards the feelings of the grief-stricken parents. She fears having to identify her own son's body in the

city morgue and imagines what other mothers have experienced—“A tag is affixed to the toe that extends from the sheet. A mother backs away. *Those bones are not my child*. But the tag bears the name heard soaring over rooftops on summer nights of kickball” (*Those Bones* 12).

The mother that Zala imagines is created from the many stories that float throughout the community about the mistreatment each family suffers at the hands of law enforcement. The show of disregard lies in the lack of patience and compassion shown by authorities who simply want to resolve the case. No time is given to the mother in Zala’s imagination to refute the notion that she is viewing her child’s body and not some other person. This mother insists that her daughter “has a mole on the right shoulder blade” and this corpse does not yet she is encouraged to claim the body as her child—contributing to the dominant narrative of the investigation (12). She is told “It’s somebody’s child downtown on the slab, so claim the bones, mother. Set the funeral date, mother. Don’t make a fuss, mother. You’re not yourself, mother. Let’s close the lid, mother. Let the community sleep again” (13). This sentiment ignores the intimate loss of a child, questions the mother’s emotional fortitude, and forces her to comply with the desires of those who simply desire to disavow the horrific epidemic and cloak the community in abjection.

By focusing so heavily on the parents as the perpetrators of the crimes against the community’s children, law enforcement and media project distinctly negative traits onto the black citizens. Their inequitable characterization of the children’s parents as violent and vile criminals indirectly assigns more positive traits onto the white and wealthy communities across town whose children are not being victimized. This allows Atlanta to reject the tragic narrative that it exists as a city where children are not safe. The thin accusations against the black parents force the suffering community to unjustly take on all of the sins of the city. The parents of the

missing and murdered children only represent one part of how the dominant narrative rejects the entire community in an effort to vindicate itself.

The black children who fall prey to the pedophilic predator are regarded as waste by law enforcement. At the time of these crimes, Atlanta is vying to serve as the host for the 1996 Olympic games and working to shed its problematic image as a southern space rife with white supremacist activity in order to gain the label of international city. A “new international” phoenix was to emerge from the ashes of the city’s past identity as a space controlled by Ku Klux Klan members who terrorized minority communities in the mid century; however, we learn within chapter two that “it was no secret that Klan members and sympathizers were on the (police) force” (111). The city leadership’s desire to rebrand Atlanta exists to the detriment of the community that is viewed as an unsavory nuisance. The second chapter of Bambara’s work titled “Connections: Convention Bucks, Investigation Flacks” alludes to the notion that the integrity of official investigation of the child murders is compromised to benefit the potential profit Atlanta could gain from cleansing its narrative and image.

In “Connections: Convention Bucks, Investigation Flacks,” Zala meets with the STOP group who try to convince her of the lack of diligence and concern local law enforcement has shown for their children’s cases. At this early stage in the text, Zala is hesitant to accept that officials would jeopardize the safety of the children in her community to advance the city; however, after listening to the STOP mothers, she acknowledges her shared suspicion that their community has been purposely disregarded by local authorities. During her talk with the STOP mothers, she is reminded of the note she had sent to her out-of-town relatives who inquired about the kidnappings where she quipped, “Convention dollars speak so much louder than an invisible community silenced by their very wealth of pigment and their very lack of dollars” (*Those Bones*



152). In this assertion, Zala cues in on the mindful abjection of her community by the status quo. Here, Bambara explores the complex psychological implications of institutional racism.

The action of *Those Bones* begins on November 16, 1981. This is five months after local and national law enforcement have closed the case and identified Wayne Williams<sup>8</sup> as the suspect. Bambara is clear in her desire for the text to focus on the city's blatant mishandling and disregard for the missing children and their community by beginning the story outside of the accepted, official narrative. Sundiata goes missing on July 19, 1981—almost one month after Williams is arrested for other crimes and alleged to also have kidnapped and murdered all of the missing children. The temporal details of the text are deliberate and resist the oppressive attempts to discredit and disappear an entire community. Zala's mothering activism occurs only after dominant culture has deemed the local epidemic over.

While Zala is deeply concerned during the official time period designated for the Atlanta Child Murders, she does not become active or take a leading role in ridding her community of its predators until Sundiata goes missing. Because Sundiata vanishes after authorities have closed the case, the preteen boy's disappearance is not allowed to be part of the larger tragedy of the child murders. As the result, little to no official attention is given to his case. Atlanta's government and law enforcement authorities have moved on and left Zala's community to fend for itself. Knowing that her son's case will go cold if left to local police and even members of her own community who have accepted the suggestion that they move on from the murders, the character inaugurates her activism with the intention of saving her child. Zala's mother status motivates her role in reigniting her community's fight against the system that disenfranchises

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Williams is currently serving two consecutive life terms for the murders of Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy Ray Payne—two adults not associated with the missing and murdered children. To date, Williams has not been indicted, tried, or convicted for the Atlanta Child Murders.

their existence. Unable to mother her missing child, she takes up the mantle for the entire community against their abjection and erasure by dominant culture. She mothers the community with her advocacy and unconventional activism.

Zala's concern for the whole community echoes Bambara's response to her daughter, Karma, who playfully admonishes her mother to "mind your own business" when the author thoughtfully surveils neighbors and other black people she encounters (*Deep Sightings* 149). Bambara retorts, "Black people are my business, sugar"—cueing in on the author's deliberate intention to pay special attention to her community in a way that dominant culture does not (149). Notably, Bambara apparently passes this mothering conviction on to Karma as the author's daughter is described as a member of "the beloved trope of the warm, strong black woman that makes us feel safe and turns the whole black diaspora into a family reunion. In the tradition of Auntie Maxine Waters, Mother Beyonce Knowles, Sister Maya Angelou, Great Matriarch Cicely Tyson" by interviewer Myles Johnson (Johnson 1). Like Bambara, Zala makes each of the children who fall victim to the unknown perpetrator her business. Her search for Sundiata evolves into a movement to wrest autonomy for the black citizens of southwest Atlanta and dignify the memory of the children who lose their lives.

Zala is initially imperfect in her mothering of the community. At the beginning of her lone quest to find Sundiata and against the advice of STOP parents, Zala submits to a polygraph. At the behest of state and national investigators, every parent of a missing and murdered child is subjected to a lie detector test to absolve them of guilt in their own progeny's disappearances. Law enforcement debases the entire black community by consistently implicating the parents either in the crimes of kidnapping and murder or, at the very least, negligent parenting.

Zala attempts to justify her willingness to participate in the polygraph by positioning it as a bargaining tool to force city officials to “review all the cases and take the map seriously” (*Those Bones* 185). She is immediately aware that the detectives and the dominant culture they represent are simply furthering their abjection of her and others like her by administering the test to her and that “she’d made a mistake” (185).

The description of the conditions of the room where she takes the examination link eerily to a punitive death chamber meant to eliminate those deemed dregs of society from existence—“They led her to a chair, a scarred-up old library chair with wide armrests and a curved ladder-rung back” (185). When she is asked, as the other STOP parents had been, if she has killed her child, Zala’s assessment of the dark, cold room and her mental musings imagine her being led down death row to her demise in the electric chair—:“Pull the shades. Give her the chair. Turn on the juice” (188). She is also unsettled by the unfamiliar, “wispy-haired white man” administering the exam who is clearly “not the brother she’d expected to see” and, thus, not a member of her community (185). To Zala, the whole ordeal quickly begins to feel like an ambush on her as a representative of her community. She has not been brought in to solve the case of the children; she is serving as a pawn to aid in the abjection of her community. Here again, Bambara demonstrates how racism is enacted against black people through psychology as well as institutionalization. There are both tangible and mental effects that allow racism to persist and gain ground.

The polygraph begins with customary questions like Zala’s name, address, and her missing child’s name, but, as the machine operator delves deeper into his line of questioning, the inquiries become more perverse and offensive. Just after asking Zala about the last date she had seen Sundiata, the machine operator “with skin like sidewalk” asks the grieving mother if she

masturbates and if she resents if her “husband has an orgasm” and she does not (185,186). As she expects, the questions become more and more of an indictment of her having a role in the boy’s disappearance (185). The intimate question jilts Zala and she becomes more guarded as she realizes that the odd questions not only allude to her possessing lewd and illicit behavior, but the entire community’s assumed character. When she is asked if she has ever stolen anything, Zala resists the deleterious assumptions about her and her community by being honest and explaining how her only foray with theft took place when she stole a piece of candy and accidentally forgot to pay for a package of light bulbs while she was pregnant with Sundiata. She is neither a liar nor a criminal. By absolving herself, she vindicates her community. The polygraph operator seems disappointed that Zala’s response is obviously true and not at all in tune with what the dominant law enforcement narrative about the parents of the missing children conveys.

After her underwhelming and reasonable response to being asked about theft, Zala notes the machine operator “seemed to be waiting for more” from her (187). He moves on to probe her about whether or not her son has been a thief, if she or her children take illegal drugs, and if she is engaged in an extramarital affair. Before she is asked outright if she has killed Sundiata, Zala is questioned as to whether her or anyone in her family has ever been arrested. She responds with prideful honesty that her “stepbrother was in jail once. With Martin Luther King” (188). By invoking Atlanta-born, civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Zala rebuffs dominant culture’s (represented in this scene by the machine operator) attempt to defame and mischaracterize her and her community. Her mention of Dr. King draws up an historic counter-narrative of black Atlanta that represents peaceful social struggle and prestige. In this, she resists

subjugation and advocates for the character of the entire community while her character is being individually maligned.

Like law enforcement, the media plays a predominant role in the abjection of Zala and her community. Zala becomes less confident in law enforcement and more motivated to lead her community against hegemonic attacks as she views a documentary of an organization called Freedom Focus with other STOP parents. In the film, the Freedom Focus representative (an expensively-dressed white woman driving a silver Rolls Royce) reveals the group's limited and insulting viewpoint on black people. According to her, the purpose of Freedom Focus is to "research issues related to troublesome groups" in order to disseminate "materials for helping those groups become less troubled" (409). STOP views the piece to buttress their belief that kidnappings and murders of their children are racially-motivated and the work of white people who see their communities as "troublesome groups" (409). Before the woman in the film even shares the organization's deeply problematic ideas about black people and black cultures, her communication of the mission of Freedom Focus reduces and denigrates the people it purports to assist by designating black communities as "troublesome" and assuming they need the help of the organization's patrons" (409). Freedom Focus actively purveys this racist narrative to a national audience. By distributing its "research" to white would-be benefactors who believe they are providing philanthropic support to a "troublesome group," Freedom Focus further allows members of white communities to disavow any of the negative traits and assign them to black communities (409).

Among the issues emphasized in the Freedom Focus interview is black motherhood. Through its publications and, at this point in the text, the documentary, the organization presents black mothering as an inherently flawed model of childrearing. During the filming, the female

Freedom Focus representative directs the cameraman's lens to pages from the organization's pamphlet which display images of "pregnant Black girls...gazing longingly through the bars of a school gate while junkies brushed past on the street,...a teen seen through the window of a tumbledown shack as she folded diapers, schoolbooks abandoned in a cobwebbed corner," and "several big-bellied girls in angora sweaters and glittery skirts...in the intake office at welfare" (410). Each of the visual representations of black motherhood is fraught with poverty, lack, and ignorance. During the filmed interview, the woman paints the black community as incompetent and needy through a lens focused on black mothers. The STOP parents become convinced that Freedom Focus capitalizes on the occurrence of the child murders to further establish that poor black people (specifically black women) are unable to effectively raise their own children when the representative states the organization's belief that "those babies should be separated from those...people who cannot care for even themselves" (411). The rash of kidnappings and homicides is supposed to serve as proof of the organization's frail and reductive claims. The STOP parents believe that the organization has moved beyond fundraising campaigns and that their work has manifested in the removal of black children from their community by kidnapping and murder.

Much like the dominant narrative, Freedom Focus exploits the misnomer that black communities can only sustain with white assistance. The Freedom Focus representative marks black mothers as a burden to the rest of the American people by linking the demographic to the welfare system which she characterizes as having "been in a shambles since its inception" because of the heavy weight of unfit black mothers (411). The outrage that Zala and the STOP parents demonstrate at viewing the film points to their awareness of the mule identity forced upon the black community. They watch in disbelief as the interview presents an argument for

removing black children from their homes to shield them from supposed inevitable delinquency. For the STOP members, this assistance sounds like kidnapping and they see a case to accuse organizations like Freedom Focus of the crimes against their children. What is most apparent in this moment in the text is the ongoing indictment of the less affluent black community of Atlanta as guilty of negligence and lawless character largely associated with mothering.

Bambara's writing of Zala's mothering activism serves largely to reject the inequitable characterization of the black community within the text. The author achieves this by thoughtfully portraying a community that represents the heterogeneity of humanity. Zala's community is both noble and flawed. They are both concerned and complacent. In her structuring of the narrative, Bambara dignifies the humanity of the community that has been burdened down with rife mischaracterization from the start of the text's action. Her method of storytelling removes the stain of criminality from the community and redirects the focus on a history of marginalization that contributes to the occurrence of the child murders.

When Sundiata is found, it is discovered that he had been "sold to a slave gang of boys and forced to work on a plantation" (528). While the dominant narrative positions the abduction of Sundiata and the other children as result of their community's neglect, Bambara refocuses this allegation onto the oppressive bodies that have subjugated black people in the American South for centuries. The child abductions not only symbolize disregard for black lives and identities; the child murders and kidnappings evoke the historicity of Middle Passage kidnap and severed slave families of earlier centuries. In this way, Bambara links contemporary persecution of black people to a history of mistreatment in the same manner that Peaches does in "Four Women."

Zala, her estranged husband Spencer, and their children Sundiata, Kofi, and Kenti leave Atlanta for the more rural Epps, Alabama after Sundiata is returned home from his harrowing

circumstance. By introducing a different southern location into the narrative, Bambara further indicts dominant culture by positioning a prosperous Atlanta as the prize for which the black children and their community are sacrificed. The ideal of a metaphoric mule only functions if there is an entity that benefits from the putting off of unsavory traits. In *Those Bones*, Atlanta represents this entity. Officials need to rid the city of any deleterious associations and, as the result, the black community becomes the mule that takes on the burdens brought about from the child murders—cleansing Atlanta in the dominant narrative.

In the Epps, Alabama imagination, Atlanta is a “city of torment” where black children are killed (257). With this depiction, Atlanta represents the “cross-fertilization of blood and landscape” that Eric Gary Anderson positions as “the ways particular physical places are marked and even suffused by political and social convulsions and trauma” (Anderson 195). This propels Atlanta back into its position as a remnant of a racially-segregated and violently-oppressive South. The rendering of Atlanta in chapter three of the novel (“The Key is in the Boot”) at the scene of the Bowen Homes daycare explosion aftermath as any other southern city riddled with racial unrest and smeared with the blood of its victims—“it could’ve been summer ’64, Neshoba County: missing—three civil rights workers...Chaney Schwerner, Goodman...and the Sixteenth Baptist Church in Birmingham, where the four little girls were killed”—further fixes the city to its shameful past (*Those Bones* 288). The aforementioned quotation links Atlanta to other southern spaces where black communities across history have been attacked by white supremacist power structures. By including this, Bambara is placing a mirror in the midst of the projection of repugnant realities on the black community and casting the imaging back onto Atlanta and dominant culture.



The peace represented by Epps connects with mothering and African ancestral roots. While in Epps, Zala is pulled between the urgings of her stepsister who wants her to “come to Africa” and mother who encourages her to “stay in Epps” instead of returning to the Atlanta that almost claimed the life of her child (553). One location is associated with the other with the parallel textual positioning of these requests from the women in Zala’s family. The common reference to Africa as the motherland of the Diaspora transcends to Epps which is literally Zala’s motherland—the place of her family’s matrilineal origin. While napping in her mother’s Alabama home, Zala dreams of “her children running across a wide savannah, a baobob silhouetted against the red sun, the legs of the gazelles a blur” (553). Physically sleeping in Alabama, she envisions Africa—both spaces where her children can roam freely without the threat of the “gentle killer”—both not Atlanta (553). In her dream, she imagines saving her children through Pan-Africanism. This perhaps points to Bambara’s own ideas about the salvation of black communities and people. This also touches upon Africa being conceptualized as a safe space of respite for black people undergoing persecution across the Diaspora. Unfortunately, hope in the continent as a motherland that can save her children often overlooks the unresolved trauma of colonialism, kidnapping, and imperialism still plaguing many parts of the continent.

The community resistance bound up in mothering demonstrated in *Those Bones*, embodies the three primary notions that Bambara professes to inform her work—that as black people, “One, we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression, ignorance, evil, and mystification is wide-awake resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown and capitulation, but transformation and renewal too (“Salvation” 204). The community within *Those Bones* is at war with the forces that literally and figuratively attack the

lives of its people. As the result of the oppression of being silenced and ignored by government officials, the ignorance of their realities portrayed by mainstream media, and the evil of the child murderer, they ultimately respond with “wide-awake resistance” inspired and led by Zala (204). Bambara’s literary treatment of this moment in history transforms the narrative about the child murders and the community affected most by them and renews the hope of those who relate most with the plight of being ignored by dominant culture.

With her insular telling of the struggle of a community to unearth truths denied them, Bambara illustrates the tasks of “community, exploration, documentation, celebration,” and “critique” she proclaims to have assigned herself (“Salvation” 204). Expressing the imperativeness of the subjugated to uproot and topple the dominant structures that silence their communities and force them outside of the realm of social concern, Bambara laments,

I despair at our failure to wrest power from those who have it and abuse it, our reluctance to reclaim our old powers lying dormant with neglect, our hesitancy to create new power in areas where it never before existed and I’m euphoric because everything in our history, our spirit, our daily genius—suggests we do it...” (“Salvation” 204)

The author’s acknowledgement of the manner in which black people are oppressed despite an inherent ability to exist beyond singular characterization projected by white supremacist narratives mirrors Zala’s final remarks in her speech to an assembly of citizens demanding the case for the murdered and missing children be reopened by authorities. Zala’s address to the diverse crowd rallying for the reopening of the Atlanta Child Murders case in the final chapter titled “Bones on the Roof” further establishes the character as a maternal figurehead in the community.

Speaking of the black community in particular, Bambara suggests that “we participate wickedly in our ambush every day of our lives” (“Salvation” 204). In her final speech, Zala makes a similar assertion regarding her community’s contribution to their own suffering through silence and a lack of collective resistance. The character conducts a sort of maternal chastisement of her neighbors by invoking prolific African American female writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Maya Angelou—telling them “we are all each other’s harvest, we are each other’s business” and that black people have always suffered the theft “of all the virtues” at the hands of dominant culture (*Those Bones* 658). Like Bambara’s great Aunt Zala, the character exposes the group to valued artists from their community. Like Bambara, the character reminds the community of the mule status that has been forced upon them.

Bambara performs a similar mother educator function to that of her great aunt and the fictional namesake character she creates in her honor in exposing her readership to elements of black culture that evoke pride and dignity. The author achieves this in many ways; however, her deliberate focus on naming is perhaps the most consistent display of diasporic depth. Zala obviously possesses an ancestral link to Bambara’s own matrilineal heritage. The character’s kidnapped son Sundiata’s name also acknowledges diasporic cultural threads as he is named for the “great bowman”<sup>9</sup> of Malian folklore who overthrew the ruling class in order to establish a homeland for his people (563). Each of the Spencer children possess African names—Sundiata, Kofi, and Kenti. This inclusion demonstrates Bambara’s intentional invocation of the African diaspora and the connectedness of the experience of the people who belong to it. As with the other characters in other texts in this study, naming is essential to black liberation.

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<sup>9</sup> Sundiata Kieta was a Malian mansa from the thirteenth century whose mother was ridiculed when he was a child for his inability to walk. Sundiata eventually conquered his disability and became the first emperor of the Mali Empire through his great exploits in battle. Griots passed his legend down through generations orally until it was finally recorded.

Continuing the thematic focus on mothering beyond local expectation, it is the Sundiata's grandmother, Mama Lovey, who ignites his agency when he attempts to flee her Alabama farm. Zala's mother, the family matriarch, charges her grandson to prepare himself as he might "be called upon real soon to do something big that requires the kind of straight-up courage" striped of him by his captors (565). It is this moment that leads the young boy to progressively heal from his trauma and pull strength from his link to his ancestor namesake.

Bambara's embodiment of maternal resistance that considers the larger community and confrontation with the repressive narratives that enact an "isolation and muzzling of the community voice" pulls to pieces the neat and deliberate packaging of the tyrannical control incited on Atlanta's poor black populace (392). *Those Bones* unsettles the unjust imaging projected on the black community by exposing the persistence of exclusionary racist practice in storytelling and narrative construction. Joyce Ann Joyce argues that "perhaps no single contemporary cultural production reflects the continuum of the material value of slaves, the hypocritical denial of this continuum and its modern guises, as well as the 'psychological dynamics, anxieties, phobias' associated with it than Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*" (Gordon 192). Bambara's rendering of Atlanta and the twentieth century child murders brings forth the recessive counter narratives that doubt and challenge the dominant depiction of a people who are deserving of more equitable portrayals.

Like her characters who organize to assure they are heard and their children's lives avenged, Bambara aids in us being more inclined to "consider the source" upon engaging with this text (*Those Bones* 476). The author defies the silence imposed on black people and champions the community that disintegrates in texts and discourse of dominance—laying siege on the "coerced silence" that Zala calls "terrorism" in her speech (661). She is as direct, loud,

and resounding as Peaches. In the epilogue of *Those Bones*, Bambara emphasizes the necessity of collective effort even within the storyteller community as she has Zala to communicate that James Baldwin's *Evidence of Things Seen* had "been a voice" in the noble attempt to reflect a just representation of the reality of the Atlanta Child Murders; however, it lacked the accompaniment of others to "round out the story" (666). Bambara's work contributes to the chorus necessary to generate narratives that recognize and are recognizable to African Americans who are subjected to bearing the burdens of a world that has strategically negated their experience.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MOMMY VS. MAMMY: MOTHERING BABIES IN *THE PRICE OF A CHILD*

The literature written by the four black female authors in this project builds upon different literary traditions of the African Diaspora. Chapter two engaged the way Toni Cade Bambara embeds the presence of “community other mothers” to demonstrate the deep ancestral roots of social activism in the black community manifested through black women caring for children who are not biologically theirs (Osaki 23). *Those Bones Are Not My Child* communicates a deep-seated cultural literary tradition in a twentieth century text in a similar way to Lorene Cary’s *The Price of A Child*. Both texts privilege the narratives of black mothers. While *Those Bones* presents a text that remembers the presence of matrilineal strength in the advocacy for black liberation, *The Price of A Child* references another prominent literary tradition of the Diaspora—the slave narrative.

*The Price of A Child* is a fictional account of the lives of enslaved people written in the twentieth century, so it is considered a neo-slave narrative. Cary’s telling of Mercer Gray’s journey from bondage to liberation exists as part of the canon of neo-slave narratives written by black women such as Margaret Walker Alexander’s *Jubilee*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and J. California Cooper’s *Family*. Cary’s novel depicts the lives of enslaved people in a manner that achieves a number of goals that theorists across African American literature and criticism assign to the genre. In her description of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, arguably one of the most mainstream neo-slave narratives, Venetria Patton designates that such narratives “imagine the life of the slave that is not captured in slave narratives” (878). Patton’s definition and

description of Morrison's work credits neo-slave narratives with achieving something beyond that of traditional slave narratives. In her estimation, their very creation constitutes something quite different from the narratives written or dictated by actual enslaved people about their lives and experiences. The actual definition of the neo-slave narrative has become contested among scholars and critics. Mostly, these varying interpretations all agree that neo-slave narratives tell stories of slavery and depart on what they achieve in terms of what they tell us about the experiences of the enslaved.

Ashraf Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives very simply as texts that "take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative," other theorists like Angelyn Mitchell describe the unique genre of African American literature in more complex terms calling them "liberatory narratives" that engage "the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom" (Rushdy 3, Mitchell 4). *The Price of A Child* includes a distinct focus on how the experience of slavery is complicated for enslaved women who were mothers. Exemplifying Mitchell's definition of the neo-slave narrative, Cary produces a story that elucidates motherhood as a model for liberation from enslavement and problematizes the concept of freedom with an in-depth look at how motherhood both complicated enslavement as well as freedom. It is in this way that Cary's text connects to Nina Simone's "Four Women." Both texts illuminate the way black women were bound beyond the laws that restrict them. While each of the verses in Simone's song could be used to show how the singer's music exists as a "new model of liberation," the verse that briefly details the identity and social condition of Saffronia serves as the best example of problematized freedom and bondage.

In the second verse of "Four Women," Simone sings,

*My skin is yellow*

*My hair is long*

*Between two worlds*

*I do belong*

*My father was rich and white*

*He forced my mother late one night*

*What do they call me*

*My name is Saffronia*

*My name is Saffronia*

The character's light-hued skin is described as yellow and signified by her name, Saffronia, a derivative of the yellow-colored spice saffron. She is not only named for her skin color; she is socially marked by it. Saffronia's light skin indicates her mixed racial heritage which jeopardizes her social freedom while simultaneously offering her access to problematic social freedom of passing. As the result of her black mother's rape by a white man, Saffronia does not possess one distinct racial heritage. Her yellow skin alienates her from abiding as a solely black or white woman. Rather, she is trapped "between two worlds" and unable to be truly free while not being as indefinitely bound as a black person who cannot choose to deny their black ancestry and pass for white (Simone).

Saffronia's existence also speaks to the systemic injustices and violence perpetrated on the black female body. In Simone's song, we are indirectly given Saffronia's mother's experience of having been raped by a white man—an act that is likely not viewed as a crime. The manner in which this detail is included in the verse leads the listener to believe that this sort of interaction between black women and white men is more of a common and accepted



occurrence in which black women possess no legal autonomy over their bodies. We do not know whether Saffronia is enslaved, but the lack of this specific detail demonstrates that the acts that lead to her conception are shamefully timeless and could occur at any moment in the history of the United States. Thus, her non-distinct name that indicates how she is seen makes her universal for others who share the same identity. Arguably, she represents the whole of the African American experience with half of it being rooted in Africa and the other half to being linked to the atrocities of the slave experience in the United States (US). Like all black people in the US at the time that Simone's song was released, Saffronia is trapped in a state forced upon her by law and social condition. Her place in society is decided by white men and her connection to her black mother only serves to debase her social status which is not unlike the slave experience of black men and women in the US.

While the main character of Lorene Cary's *The Price of A Child's* is not the product of interracial rape, she is very much as trapped as other victims of chattel slavery. Her identity is controlled by a society that enables white wealth and patriarchy to control and violate the bodies of black women. Mercer Gray begins the narrative as Virginia Pryor. Her birth name signifies her entrapment in a racist society as well as her lack of autonomy over her life and her body. Her enslaved mother is allowed to name her Virginia and does so to ensure her child will know where she was born in case she is ever sold to an owner in another state. Like other enslaved persons, Virginia is given the surname of her owner—Pryor. Both names fix her identity to property and speak to her inability to dictate her own destiny. Not unlike Saffronia, her name denotes her identity while simultaneously signifying her lack of control over her social condition. She is trapped. Her name change later on in the action not only assists her in absconding from her owner; it also symbolizes her newfound self-determination. Mercer is a derivative of the

word mercy and gray relates to a reoccurring dream the character has that reminds her of the son she is forced to leave behind when she escapes slavery. So, her name begins to signify liberation, but not without embedding the high cost of her freedom.

While there are a few of Cary's other publications which embed a discussion of the necessity and strength of black mothering such as "Mother Moxie" (2001), black motherhood as a means to resist systematic and legalized oppression toward black people is at the center of *The Price of a Child*. The narrative of Mercer Gray's emancipation is hinged on her mothering act. Throughout the text, the character's identity is linked to her children in disparate ways. As an enslaved woman, she is deemed most useful to her owner (Jackson Pryor) for her ability to conceive and birth children. *The Price of a Child* details her escape from bondage and reveals how the enslavement of black women affected the ability to mother in three distinct ways—1) forced motherhood, 2) choosing motherhood, and 3) resisting motherhood.

Considering that Cary produces a neo-slave narrative that recalls a model of liberation that is often disregarded—mothering—there must be a discussion of the distinctions between the mammy and a mommy. The mammy archetype has been historically forced upon black women. Its classification across history has existed to limit black women and reduce their presence to one that is non-threatening and profitable to white supremacy. Beyond that, the creation of the mammy character isolates black women into a realm of care that does not allow for them to possess familial ties of their own. Mammy has no roots or branches. While she may bear children, her identity and usefulness in the dominant narrative is associated with her care for white children not her own. When she is allowed or expected to care for black children, it is to further sustain white supremacist systems not to advance her own family.

This chapter focuses primarily on Lorene Cary's deliberate shifting of her text's main character from the role of a mammy to that of a mommy as a representation of the distinct association that black motherhood possesses to black liberation. Both of the African American writers in this study, Lorene Cary and Toni Cade Bambara, write about black women in America; however, the history of slavery and how black people initially came to be a part of America's history is bound up in a transnational reality. Thus, the discussion of the transnational link between black mothering practice in Nigeria and the United States remains germane when considering their works. The Middle Passage not only transported millions of enslaved Africans to America and other global spaces, it carried their cultural traditions as well. Melina Abdullah affirms that centering mothering as the means for community and nation building possesses roots in African tradition—specifically West Africa (57). This model of liberation has deep cultural roots. Abdullah goes on to suggest that while “the treatment of Black mothers [within their own communities] both on the African continent and in African America has been one of respect and reverence, Black motherhood within Western society has brought subjugation and even oppression” to black women (57). Abdullah's assertion implies that black motherhood possessed a venerable position in pre-colonial Africa that waned at the appearance of European influence and control. Abdullah also contends that the tradition of a “mother-centered matrix” or communities where black mothers led the social and cultural terrain of their communities was brutally halted by slavery as black women were not only denied any autonomy over their own bodies but were routinely separated from their offspring.

After the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in America in 1807, the country's internal slave trade depended heavily on black women bearing more children to serve as human property. This reality underscores the usefulness of black women as biological mothers, but not

much else beyond that. Allowing black women to form emotional bonds with their biological children would challenge their utility as human breeders and defy the lack of legal sovereignty they possessed over themselves and any children they bore. Enslaved women possessed no legal right to their children. They, along with their offspring, existed as the property of their owners. Thus, the formation of mammy as a non-mother is connected to the historical need for black women to serve and nurture outside of the realm of motherhood to support white supremacy.

*The Price of A Child* intricately illustrates the reality of black women being forced to be motherly while simultaneously being denied the right to mother. The creation of mammy demonstrates the power associated with the role. Through the character and other unjust measures, black women were prevented from making choices for themselves and their families and were isolated from producing future generations. Denying black motherhood not only denied an aspect of black female identity; it further denied black female humanity. Cary's text unearths what Loretta Ross might define as "the radical concept of mothering" or *revolutionary mothering* in her creation of and narrative surrounding Mercer Gray. While Mercer's story is loosely based on the 1855 case of escaped enslaved woman Jane Johnson, the author fleshes out the narrative by centering Mercer's emancipation on her experience as a mother.

Like Buchi Emecheta, Cary's focus on issues concerning black women is deliberate. A casual glance at the author's curriculum vitae depicts a persisting concern with the enslavement of black people in America and the effect of slavery on contemporary issues plaguing the black community. In a 1992 article she penned for *Newsweek* magazine, Cary indicts America's continued disregard and disenfranchisement of black people stating,

We Americans continue to value the lives and humanity of some groups more than the lives and humanity of others. That is not paranoia. It is our historical legacy and a

present fact; it influences domestic and foreign policy and the daily interaction of millions of Americans...It is no longer true that an African-American's life can be bought outright...But it is true that African-American life in the United States has long been, and is still, devalued. (23)

To contextualize her claim, Cary invokes African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks by ending the article with the cryptic declaration—"We die soon" (23). Cary's vested interest in the perpetual subjugation of black people in America is evidenced across her body of work. By alleging that black lives exist as overwhelmingly devalued within American social and political culture, Cary summons the impetus for situating black mothering as revolutionary and resistant put forth in *Revolutionary Mothering*. In the preface of the work, Ross contends that "it is a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist"—black lives (xviii). While Ross goes on to elucidate her statement by listing black people of varying ages who suffered gross injustice (ranging from wrongful convictions and harsh sentencing to death) at the hands of the criminal justice system during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (i.e. Oscar Grant, Marissa Alexander, Michael Brown, Mumia, etc.), her claim is rooted in the dehumanization of black lives and bodies during American slavery.

Cary's body of work draws powerful connections between historical devaluation of black people and contemporary manifestations of similar atrocities. In this way, she possesses a transnational focus in the writing produced across her career. Of her five books, three (including *The Price of a Child*) are set during slavery. The author has also produced one script titled "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation" which documents the lives of enslaved Africans who were owned by George Washington. Of the three other authors in this study, Cary is perhaps the least known. However, her rich canon reveals a deep-seated

concern with the plight of black people and the implications of historical oppression on the lives black people are able to live across the world today.

Mammy is created. She is not real. Mammy is a construction initiated in the white imagination for manifold purposes. While black women were initially forced and later socially relegated to performing domestic duties in white homes across US history, mammy exists as a gross mischaracterization of these women and their realities. Micki McElya notes, “Black women did work in white homes, cooked innumerable meals, cared for white children, and surely formed emotional ties to white family members at times, but the mammy was—and is—a fiction” (4). The creation of mammy (among other things) allowed Southern landowning whites a means of justification for the continuation of the brutal institution of chattel slavery.

According to McElya, mammy epitomized the mythical faithful slave and, thus, negates the necessity to end unjust systems of social and political oppression against black people in America (3). McElya posits,

The myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves—of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism—seem not to exist at all. The mammy figure affirmed their wishes. (3)

McElya’s assertion points to the usefulness of mammy’s creation to American’s national narrative surrounding race across generations. Representing the singing, happy-to-serve domestic caregiver, mammy simultaneously denies the mistreatment of Blacks during and after enslavement and eases any residual white guilt for the egregious system.

Carolyn F. Gerald speaks to the power connected to creating characters and images through myths or image-making, especially as it relates to racial imaging, in asserting that our realities are linked to these mythical images whether or not those who produce the images possess an accuracy of proximity to their cultural depth. While the image put forth through mammy does not represent the complex and nuanced reality of black women and mothers, the role has become synonymously linked with black maternal care disallowing black women from totally breaking away from the problematic character. Gerald suggests that all created images, especially those within literary art that reinforce racial bias, represent a “certain point of view” that emphatically emphasizes certain features of reality while blocking out some and completely ignoring the rest (Ervin 133). The only reality that exists in the mammy configuration is that of black women being linked to domestic servitude and care. Mammy is most damaging because of the pronouncement of the black woman’s attitude towards being forced to perform these duties across history. Mammy is happy to serve. The real black women who were forced to work in the realm of domesticity from enslavement into the mid-twentieth century were never given the liberty to formulate an opinion that would be valued about their social lot.

In Gerald’s estimation, these images leave us with a reality that is not objective but rather a “reshaping of reality” (133). The danger in this manipulation is that it allows for the most dominant voices of society to control narratives that house an amalgam of cultures and realities. The perspective becomes one-sided and valid portrayals and truths are disregarded. The purveyor of these images comes to exist as the unworthy authority and an entire cultural demographic becomes housed “within that other person’s sphere of influence and can be led to believe whatever he wishes us to believe” (133). Thus, a dangerous monolithic narrative is generated and perpetuated. This has been the case with the long-accepted and widely-promoted

image of the mammy. Dominant culture continues to generate the limited, problematic image of the mammy in various narrative forms (i.e. literature, film, media, brand spokespersons, etc.)—reshaping the reality of an entire populace into the fantasy and longings of a few. Thus, for many, mammy is real.

In addition to assuaging white guilt for the commodification of black bodies, mammy's existence venerates white benevolence. The projection of the character as docile, content, and helpful has always been associated with her proximity to white families and people. Mammy is only mammy if she is in the charge of white children and their families. The idea is that she is not naturally predisposed to be courteous and productive, but that she benefits from the guidance and altruism of the white families for which she works. McElya notes,

The black mammy figure became a powerful icon of motherly affection and care, but this was not held to be an inherent attribute, innate to black women. Rather, promoters of the mammy narrative believed these traits to be the product of the supposedly civilizing environs of white domestic space. (82)

While mammy was caring for white families, we were to believe that it was her who profited most from the interaction. In this way, the idea of mammy literally and figuratively supported whiteness.

Although mammy performed a vital function for sustaining white supremacy, her utility necessitated the complete negation of her own autonomy and agency. The figure was viewed as fulfilling her duty to a gracious white family not as if she were simply working. This idea that mummies were fortunate to possess their positions as caregivers to white children and families persisted across history. As recently as 2009, Kathryn Stockett produced recreations of mammy in her *New York Times* bestselling novel *The Help*. Stockett joined a burgeoning tradition of



white writers sentimentalizing the role of black domestic workers employed by white families, but what is remarkable about her work is the personal inclusion of memories of her own mammy—Demetrie. After penning over four hundred pages of fiction detailing the interactions of black women who worked as maids and childcare providers for white families during the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi, Stockett includes an afterword where she recounts her childhood experiences with Demetrie—tying herself to the characters in the book who hired the help and separating herself from any association with the mammy characters. Stockett’s afterword alludes to the narrative which paints mammy as socially and morally privileged to work in such close proximity to white people as she recalls her own feelings that Demetrie was “lucky to have...a secure job in a nice house, cleaning up after white Christian people” who “were filling a void in her life” (Stockett 448). I mention Stockett to underscore the persistence of the mammy myth in America’s racial consciousness.

One of the most damning blows to black female identities from the creation of mammy is its deleterious effect on the concept of black motherhood. Mammy is not and cannot be a mother. The very essence of the character requires she focus her strict attention and allegiance on her white wards and negates any sort of personal familial extension. Mammy is unwed and, although, she may have birthed children, her maternal acumen is in no way associated with caring for her own offspring. In this way, the mammy myth has policed black female bodies and identities by disallowing any meaningful role to the character in constructing and maintain her own community. Abdullah suggests that while mothering has served as a site of information for the formation of the mammy archetype, it exists as a gross misrepresentation of black women and possesses “complications and troubling caveats” that “disempower and justify the oppression of Black people, Black women, and Black mothers specifically” (59). The myth of the mammy

challenges the reality of black women as mothers. Thus, the endeavor to exist as a black mother to black children is diametrically opposed to the concept of the mammy.

Abdullah characterizes the black mother or “the Black community’s ‘Mama,’” as “an empowered, strong mother figure whose guidance, nurturing, wisdom and mother wit ushers all who she mothers towards greater safety and freedom” (59). Cary’s characterization of the enslaved Ginnie and her arduous journey to becoming the emancipated Mercer centers on her mothering identity. Alluding to the metaphor of Simone’s musical narrative in contextualizing the texts within this study is perhaps most appropriate in the case of *The Price of A Child*. Each of the selected narratives in this project possess moments where freedom is attained through a mothering; however, Cary’s text demonstrates this dynamic in literal terms. Mercer is literally freed from enslavement and her mother status is at the center of her liberation while problematizing it.

The text begins in 1855 Virginia. In the first lines, the reader is introduced to Virginia (called Ginnie)—an enslaved woman who longs for freedom. We quickly learn that Ginnie is the mother of three children—one she conceived in her relationship with an enslaved man named Cooper and two others who were children of her owner. While she has given birth to three children, Ginnie is not allowed to mother due to her slave status. She is prevented from making any decisions about her children’s existence. At this time in the US, “all children borne in this country [America]’ derived their status from ‘the condition of the mother’” (Kendi 41). So, enslaved women could only give birth to more of the enslaved. Ginnie’s children also possess slave status despite the two youngest having been fathered by her owner. Very obviously, enslaved people had no control over other enslaved people, thus Ginnie held no position of authority or autonomy over her own children. Law very literally prevented her from mothering.

She was allowed to care for the children by nursing them, attending to their hygiene, and preparing food for them; however, this was no different from what she would have been allowed to perform for white children who were free. Slavery fixed Ginnie into the role of the mammy.

The idea of mammy forced black women to mother within the boundaries of white supremacy simultaneously denying their choice to be mothers and forcing a resistance to motherhood as it had been defined for them. Cary writes Ginnie's oldest daughter Etta as having been fathered by a formerly-enslaved<sup>10</sup> man named Cooper and her two youngest children (Mattie and Benjamin) by Pryor—giving Ginnie no autonomy or ownership over her children. As the result of laws that designated enslaved women as the bearers of enslaved children, Pryor benefitted physically as well as financially from his sexual interaction with Ginnie—doing what historian Ibram X. Kendi describes as “reap financial reward from relations ‘upon a negro woman’” (41). One aspect of the mothering model for liberation black women were able to create in this role existed in black women abiding within the mammy role as a clandestine way to fashion their freedom. On the surface, they would be the mammy while using the spaces they could inhabit because of the role to chip away at the social structures that held them captive.

Although Ginnie is legally prohibited from being a mother, she has mothering responsibility forced upon her in an effort to deter her freedom. Lillian Osaki describes this occurrence as the instance in which “the enslaved pregnant black woman can be seen as both captured and multiply marked” (25). When Ginnie is pregnant with her oldest child Willetta (Etta), she attempts to escape and follow Etta's father Cooper who is also running towards his freedom. Because she served in the capacity of a mammy—charged with domestic responsibilities—Ginnie is “missed sooner than she expected and they sent someone out to look

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<sup>10</sup> Cooper escapes to freedom while Ginnie is still pregnant with Willietta (*The Price* 10).

for her” (*The Price* 8). Her role on the plantation proved so vital to the way of life of its white inhabitants that she was sought after and captured before she ever made it to her meeting point with Cooper. Upon being captured, Pryor reminds Ginnie of how biological motherhood fixes her to bondage by referencing the improbability of her being able to escape while carrying a child. Indicting her decision to seek freedom, he chastises, “How’re you gonna go, Ginnie?...It’s not just you. You’ll have to take care of your little baby soon, won’t you?” (10). By referring to the unborn Etta, Pryor uses the motherhood to which she does not even have access to further bond Ginnie to her slave status. She is expected to act as if she is a mother although she is not recognized as such. Her child will not belong to her and she will have no say in whether or not she will be able to care for the child. Motherhood, in the way it was constructed by Pryor and white patriarchy at large, prevented her from running and bonded her to her life of servitude.

Pryor emphasizes Ginnie’s bondage with mothering duty. The mammy archetype was created and used to limit and stifle black women’s social mobility. McElya notes that “racial constraints on the ideas of sexuality, domesticity, and motherhood” are steeped in the creation and existence of mammy narratives of the twentieth century (McElya 76). Expectations for black women and their behavior (especially that associated with family and childrearing) have been shaped by the adoption of mammy. While contemporary purveyors of the problematic narrative may fundamentally believe the stories and characteristics of mammy to be true, Pryor’s character represents the generation of this fictional character to further bond black women to the duty of serving white interests and fantasies. Pryor affixes Ginnie to the responsibility of caring for children who in every other instance are not treated as her own. He is fully aware that Ginnie’s children are not hers. They are his—even the one who he has not biologically fathered. In the text, it is noted that Pryor had “been raised to make money and take comfort from black

people” and as Ginnie sat in front of him after her capture he was simultaneously protecting “his profit” and attempting to convince her that escaping enslavement would ironically diminish her as the mother she was not allowed to be (*The Price* 10).

The mental games that Pryor plays to tug at Ginnie’s maternal obligations are not the sole factor keeping her in bondage. The physical limitations of her pregnancy cause her to feel relief when she is allowed to sit and her desire for freedom make her ashamed for feeling such relief. While she is still seated across from her owner, Ginnie grapples with the shame of not being able to successfully escape because “pain shot through her buttocks and down her thighs” and “her calves bunched like fists” (10). She realizes that because she is gestating a fetus, she “wasn’t running,” but “she was sitting, and pitifully glad of it” (10). Cary writes the character as possessing a vitriolic anger towards Pryor for pointing out that she could not run because of her child. Ginnie “wished she could spit in Pryor’s face” for being partially right in that her child did prevent her from being free (10). However, Pryor and Ginnie draw on two different reasons for her inability to escape. Pryor leans on manipulative maternal obligation while Ginnie’s mind goes to the more practical—she is simply not in the physical shape to make the trip.

Ginnie’s unfixed mother status is the lynchpin of her bondage. After her first escape attempt and the birth of her first child, Pryor adds to Ginnie’s obligations as his property. Sharing that “he’d been on the lookout for a girl like her for some time,” Pryor begins to use Ginnie as a sex slave—forcing her to succumb to his sexual whims and provide him “his comfort” when he travels to town and “his wife stayed home in the country” (11). This role further contributes to Ginnie’s feeling forced by motherhood to abide in slavery as she fears Pryor would simply sell her if she refused to give in to his sexual abuse—separating her from her daughter. Suzy, an enslaved woman who has “cared for her like a mother,” questions Ginnie as

to whether or not Pryor allows her to take her daughter along when she is forced to travel with him—“He lets you take Etta when you go now, huh?” (11). Suzy’s inquiry points to the lack of sovereignty Ginnie has over her own life as well as the life of her child. The question also highlights Pryor’s manipulation of Ginnie’s thin link to actual motherhood. Allowing her to bring her child on his trips provides Ginnie with the façade of mothering freedom. Perhaps Pryor feels as if allowing Ginnie to pretend to possess mothering autonomy with Etta will stay any desire she has to attempt another escape. Ginnie, however, is clear that her access to her child is mandated by Pryor’s whims. Although she realizes that “Pryor would not have whipped or thumbscrewed or tied her hand to foot and raped her had she tried to refuse him,” she shares with Suzy that had she not given in to his advances, she might have been sold and forced to leave her daughter (11). Ginnie tells Suzy, “you’d’ve got Etta the same way you got me. That’s if we was lucky” (11). Ginnie knows that any power she possesses as a mother is directly linked to Pryor, thus it is not power at all.

Pryor’s strategic attempts to mentally coax Ginnie out of her desire for freedom never succeed. As she contemplates escaping her slave identity more and more, Ginnie begins to lobby for her freedom by entreating Pryor’s feigned humanity. Part of the appeal of the mammy archetype is the contribution her existence makes to the myth of the righteousness of white slave owners. McElya contends that the stories of mammy provided “reassurance that their authors’ patriarchal benevolence was real” (4). In Pryor, Cary creates a character that exists as a purveyor of this mythical white male virtue.

In allowing Pryor to be further defined by Ginnie’s characterization, Cary presents Pryor’s identity as relational to Ginnie’s in a manner not unlike the concept put forth in Michel

Foucault's "Panopticism." Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon<sup>11</sup> centers mainly on the treatment and socialization of prisoners. In the French philosopher's estimation, the Panopticon functioned effectively "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault 182). Slavery and imprisonment are not unrelated. In both, certain power structures are fashioned and maintained in order to create a system in which all involved parties understand and abide within their placement in the society. Pursuant to Foucault's analysis of this structure and the system it creates, the idea is that after a certain amount of time the system of power will function without manipulation—automatically. Thus, the concept of Panopticism connects to the methods of maintaining power in the relationships between slave owner and enslaved person.

The generation and perpetuation of archetypes like the mammy figure work in a similar fashion. The distance these social constructions place between the owner and enslaved person allow for both groups to act within a programmed reality where one is socially superior and possesses more power in relation to the other. As the result of constructions like the mammy, enslaved persons (like prisoners in the Panopticon) understand their inferiority and powerlessness in relation to the individual who represents the community of power (the owner) both physically and socially. This understanding does not escape the owner, in that, their position as the more powerful entity becomes dependent on the existence of those with inferior positioning.

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<sup>11</sup> The **Panopticon** is a type of institutional building and a system of control designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century.

In terms of social positioning as it relates to sites of power, Foucault's Panopticism describes the semiotic relationship the slave owner's identity possesses in relation to the enslaved people he owns. Mammy's existence as one thing allows for her most polar opposite—wealthy, white men—to exist as something quite different, but not unrelated to her identity. Foucault believed that truths existed because of the value assigned to them by humans and that ideological value judgments paraded themselves as facts. This allows the individual to feel a sense of supervision constantly—leading them to conduct themselves within the constraints of that system under the guise that their behavior is in line with the natural order. The Panopticon serves to mold and shape the individual.

Thus, Pryor is able to indirectly praise his own skewed generosity by praising Ginnie as a “handsome girl” and an “excellent woman” of whom he was certain “could run a fine home of her own in a place such as Washington” (*The Price* 12). Although he does not outright profess his belief that all of Ginnie's positive attributes are a direct result of his taking her into the house and taking her as his mistress, this is implied. In reminding Ginnie of how capable and “excellent” she is, Pryor is reminding her of the debt she owes to him—a debt she must pay with her body and freedom (12). Pryor denies Ginnie's frequent requests for manumission by stating that he needs her. Narration at this moment in the text states that Pryor says this “the way children say they need a doll baby or a lump of sugar”—alluding to the notion that Ginnie is a useless plaything to the slave owner (12). However, more than just Pryor's pleasure is predicated on his ownership of Ginnie. Denying Ginnie freedom and keeping her as his mistress is essential to his professed identity as a benevolent slave owner who “prided himself on his leniency” (8). To this end, McElya conveys that “promoters of the mammy narrative believed these traits to be the product of the supposedly civilizing environs of white domestic space” (82).



Although Cary does not create a moment where Ginnie explicitly inhabits the traditional role of the mammy, positioning her with extremely close proximity to her white owner as an enslaved woman whose responsibilities are predominately located inside the owner's home situates the character as thus. Cary further demonstrates this dynamic in her text with Pryor's vehement fight to reclaim her later on in the text. He is not only attempting to regain ownership of his property, he is working to regain his identity.

Ginnie's fixity as a mammy figure supports Pryor's white, patriarchal identity and is further enhanced by her children. In order for the mammy narrative to thrive, black women who were to embody the role had to be separated from their image as mothers to their own children. McElya posits that "faithful slave narratives emerged from a long history of white denials of the legitimacy of black families and their emotional bonds under slavery" (80). Thus, mammy as a created archetype served two distinct purposes—1) to underscore the myth of white benevolence and 2) to falsely demonstrate the lack of familial connection among black people. Conveying both messages created a means to control the social mobility of black women and deny the black woman's humanity. Mammy, thus, is presented as only useful to white families and not her own—situating, as McElya asserts, "black motherhood solely within the white home" (82). This dynamic denied black mothers any semblance of power and frames black motherhood as a tool to positively define whiteness. McElya also notes that presenting the mammy as only useful to the care of white families and children,

showed a fundamental lack of concern for black women's private emotions, their families, and the maternal work they performed outside the white domestic sphere. This absence of concern was never nonchalant or careless; instead it revealed an overriding white desire not to perceive black women as belonging to any other family at all. (81)

Moreover, slavery denied black people the right to their own lives as well as access those of their relatives.

While some slave owners may have allowed their enslaved human property to marry and live with their children, there were no legal or social rights associated with these allowances. Cary represents this scenario of enslaved men who were allowed by their owners to visit their makeshift families once a week as a seeming reward for their forced, free labor during the rest of the week in the book. She writes about the “Saturday-night roads crowded with black men on their way to visit their wives, carrying with them their dirty clothes and parcels of food” to describe the control held by slave owners in dangling the feigned acknowledgment of humanity in front of the black people they enslaved (*The Price* 14). In all, any action of this sort simply created a Panopticon-esque system of control where the owner was viewed as gracious for permitting the illusion of a family life for enslaved people. The slave owners employed this method to define themselves as lenient to their human property and to further impress upon the enslaved population their relegated social (and legal) status without hostility.

Pryor owns Ginnie’s three children and shrewdly uses them to support his illusion of benevolence and his reason for keeping her in bondage. He not only declares to need Ginnie for his own pleasure, but he discursively alludes to her enslavement being linked to her children in two ways. In one way, she is needed for the care of the children (as their mammy, not their mother). And in more complicated terms, their freedom is linked to her compliance to Pryor’s whims or at least this is what he references when he says that he will free “the children, of course. In time” (12). Ginnie is led to believe by Pryor that her docility to her forced servitude will yield the emancipation of her children. While she does not trust Pryor’s insinuations “sometimes she believed him, because it helped” (12). Although her owner’s disingenuous

intentions are clear, Ginnie maintains hope that remaining enslaved and performing her mammy role will aid in freeing her children. Motherhood literally and figuratively keeps her bound at this point in the text.

The events focused upon in this chapter demonstrate how Ginnie and other black female characters are simultaneously forced to mother, denied motherhood, and resistant to mothering. Ginnie's journey toward freedom begins when she finally decides that abiding within the social parameters set for her as Pryor's property and mammy to her own children will never yield her physical or psychological freedom. We learn on the first page of the narrative that she "stank of rebellion" before she attempts her successful escape from Pryor (*The Price* 3). Her liberation stench is the result of the orange water given to her by her surrogate mother and the plantation cook, Suzy. Suzy is charged with taking Ginnie in after her biological mother Lily dies. This water foreshadows her escape from slavery in just a few pages. The fragrant water being provided by the woman who deliberately and against social convention mothers Ginnie introduces the strong thread of black maternal influence that permeates throughout the text. While I refer to Suzy as a surrogate mother, the text describes the true intended nature of their relationship—"she was apprenticed to Suzy, who had taken her in as a girl after Lily died" (10). The two women formed a familial bond that was not intended by their being placed together. This is evinced by the conversation between the two women referenced earlier in this chapter.

As far as Pryor is concerned, Suzy is simply to guide Ginnie in the ways of caring for white families. Her symbolic anointing of Ginnie with the orange water at the beginning of the story inaugurates a zeal that contextualizes her mediated mothering experience and foreshadows her freedom for the reader. Not surprisingly, Ginnie's mother status (as a woman who is not allowed to autonomously mother) is at the center of her escape. Ginnie and Suzy's bond is

strengthened through their forced mammy experience and defiant mothering roles. Both women have mothering forced upon them in the role of the mammy for children with whom they are allowed to interact; however, they privately choose to mother on their own terms. Suzy supports and provides advice to Ginnie about her role with Pryor and, behind the closed doors of her hotel room, Ginnie reprimands her children from behavior she deems unacceptable and makes plans for their futures. During her enslavement, Ginnie maintains her ability to be close to her children by relinquishing her own body.

In many ways, Ginnie garners strength for her decision to pursue freedom without Benjamin from Suzy—her mother figure after Lily’s death. Suzy provides a pivotal example of revolutionary black mothering for Ginnie before her fateful trip to Philadelphia. Ginnie is fully aware of Suzy’s pertinence in her life as a mothering example and savior of sorts. Her enslaved status limited Ginnie’s biological mother Lily from serving as a positive maternal influence. Traumatized from many instances of brutality associated with her slave status, she has moments of mental instability that result in violent mistreatment of Ginnie. Ginnie remembers a violent interaction with her biological mother where Lily “beat her so bad that she wrenched the girl’s shoulder right out of socket” (23). It is moments like these that force Ginnie to draw closer to Suzy for maternal succor (23). When Ginnie tells Suzy that she must accompany Pryor on his diplomatic assignment to Nicaragua without her youngest child Benjamin, Suzy gifts Ginnie “two tarnished dollars” before she leaves (23). Though the two women never overtly speak about the possibility of Ginnie claiming her freedom while on the trip, this gesture points to Suzy’s maternal understanding and approval of Ginnie choosing freedom for her and her two oldest children. Suzy’s support bears no judgmental tone for leaving Benjamin behind and

symbolically reassures Ginnie that she will care for the young boy once she is no longer able to do so.

Pryor's manipulation of Ginnie through her children permeates throughout the narrative. The demand by Pryor's wife Joellen (referred to as The Bat) that Ginnie leave her youngest child Benjamin on the plantation while she travels with Pryor to Nicaragua plagues the character and gives credence to the title of the text. After this decision is made, both Pryor and Joellen use the infant Benjamin as ransom to keep Ginnie in bondage beyond what the law mandates. This cruel tactic almost succeeds as the character reflects, "they'd tried to hold her by holding Benjamin, but she pulled free anyway" (64). This occurrence demonstrates the irony in the separation of mothering identity from black women in order to support the separation of slave families for profit. The Pryor family relies on Ginnie's possession of a maternal instinct and connection with Benjamin to prevent her from escaping. In the midst of her traveling through territories that have outlawed slavery with her owner, she is expected to act as mammy to her two eldest children and feel like a mother to her youngest, absent child. Joellen depends on Ginnie's humanity while simultaneously denying it.

Notably, before the trip takes place, Pryor plans to allow Ginnie to bring all three children. His justification is steeped in his belief in his constructed identity as a benevolent and, thus, beloved slave owner. He reassures,

his wife, who had pouted, and his in-laws that Ginnie wouldn't run. She was well cared for and obedient. He'd had her since she was a girl, and if loyalty wasn't sufficient, she was smart enough to see how slim were her chances and how much she stood to lose. (*The Price* 18)

In this moment in the text, Cary presents a Pryor who is convinced of his effectiveness in convincing Ginnie of his desired identity as a good and lenient owner. He also seems to realize that Ginnie is not at all intellectually inferior. Ironically, he hopes that she will either not acknowledge that she is unconvinced of his performance as a good owner or rely upon her intelligence to dissuade her plan to escape. Both hopes emphasize Ginnie's existence outside of the realm of identity Pryor constructs for her.

While Pryor seems to work more to convince himself of Ginnie's loyalty to him in his explanation to his family, it also initially escapes him that allowing all three children to accompany them on the trip further presumes his existence as a kind, gentle master. It is Joellen who insists that they leave Benjamin or "Bennie-boy...his favorite" behind (*The Price* 18). Mattie and Benjamin are Pryor's only sons. They are the only male heirs he possesses and although their biracial identity would prevent them from traditionally caring on his legacy, the reader is told that Pryor "made out a portion of land for them in his will" because "Jack Pryor wasn't like some swine who'd sell their own" (18). The only legacy Ginnie's sons would be able to carry on for Pryor is that of his professed identity as a gracious slave owner. In her review of Cary's text, Jan Furman notes that,

Any macho pride he may feel as the father of sons is tempered by their status as his slaves. As such, they will carry his name only as chattel and never as legitimate heirs. It is this uneasy assemblage of slave holder authority, male prerogative, and vulnerability that make Pryor an object of both contempt and pity. (Furman 1)

While Pryor's struggle to maintain his white Southern male machismo becomes more palpably pitiful as the text progresses, he is in no way an object of pity, but of unadulterated privilege. The transaction of land to the boys would only take place after Pryor's death—ensuring that his

leniency and generosity to his slaves would be solidified in the memory of him. In this fact, the children would still not belong to Ginnie, but would ever exist as provisional heirs to Pryor. Under the guise of generosity, the slave owner plans to continue to deny Ginnie the right to mother her children.

Once Pryor and Ginnie arrive in Philadelphia in a layover of sorts before heading to Nicaragua, Pryor's lack of confidence in the loyalty of Ginnie as a happy-to-serve, loyal mammy diminishes and he actively employs the tactic of leaning into her maternal emotions by reminding her that she has left Benjamin behind. He embodies both the mythical good master and paranoid abuser when he informs her that he will have food sent to their hotel room to ensure they are well-fed and warns her in a scolding fashion—"Do not leave this room...Ginnie, you hear me: you and these two children...do not leave this room" (13). Pryor both points his finger at Ginnie and smiles when making this comment—straddling the line of feigned concern and oppressive rebuke. Ginnie is clear of Pryor's intentions in reprimanding her in front of the children. She notes that chastising her "in front of her own children was the sort of insult that Pryor generally spared her" (13). When they were in a physical space where his ownership and control over her could not be questioned due to the laws of Virginia, Pryor allows Ginnie to undertake certain mothering privileges such as not being treated as a child in their presence. This seeming act of kindness would further underscore Pryor's performance as the good master and, in his estimation, appease Ginnie's desire to move beyond the mammy role with her children. Pryor cannot take this chance in Philadelphia in 1855 and so he reverts to treatment that substantiates his desired social role for Ginnie and himself. Again, her mother status and children are at the center of this manipulation.

In *Ginnie*, Cary creates a character who is keenly aware of Pryor's performance as well as his fear at its frailty in her presence. Furman succinctly unpacks this complex dynamic in stating,

in opposition to Pryor's delusional sentiments is Virginia's perception of his criminality. He is guilty, not merely of enslaving her, but of the insolent assumption that favors and civility could sanitize enslavement. Always, there is Virginia's smoldering but veiled contempt of Pryor's vanity and false pride. (Furman 1)

Ginnie understands that Pryor's use of the phrase "these two children" exists as a threat and reminder to her—"Ginnie recognized it, of course, as he meant her to do—reminding her that Benjamin had stayed home" (14). The narration describes Ginnie's reaction to Pryor's threat in a manner that speaks to her awareness of her true status in Pryor's mind and the connection of his manipulation of her through her desire to mother on her own terms. Speaking of her contemplation and reaction to Pryor's cloaked threat, this passage reads, "Ginnie bore it like a champion, though, like fighters who'd take a hit to the face and keep on standing. Or wives. She didn't flinch, even though she knew they were holding Bennie-boy for surety. She saw the chance of a chance to run—and its price" (14). Here, Ginnie is obviously affected by the attack on her desire for freedom and the reminder of her lack of mother status. Where Pryor had been so diligent about allowing her to pretend motherhood to keep her mentally enslaved, he desperately aborts this strategy when Ginnie possesses a viable opportunity to claim her mother status as well as her freedom.

Ginnie responds to the Pryor's scheme to both exploit her choice to mother while denying her the right to mother by resisting the denial of her mother status. She feels both deep, disturbing grief at the thought of leaving Benjamin as well as encouraging hope at the thought of



freeing Etta and Mattie. Despite the guaranteed loss of her youngest child, Ginnie decides to enlist the help of a free, black chambermaid working in the hotel where she and the children are staying with Pryor until their departure to Nicaragua. This is where Cary's text begins to intersect with the historical account of Jane Johnson<sup>12</sup>. Fortunately, Ginnie's unsuccessful plea to the fearful chambermaid is overheard by one of the young men hired to empty guests' chamber pots. The young man helps get word of Ginnie's desire to emancipate herself to a messenger who sends a note to William Still and Passmore Williamson of the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. At this point, Ginnie's escape is underway.

Ginnie's liberation from Pryor's ownership plays out exactly like the account of Jane Johnson documented by William Still. Narration describes it in these terms—"this escape was a public exhibition"—pointing to the demonstrative aspect of the event (*The Price* 43). The public location of Ginnie's escape serves as more fuel for Pryor's rage towards her for daring to challenge his power and identity. In order to aid Ginnie and her children, William Still and Passmore Williamson board the boat on which they are seated with Pryor and address Ginnie directly. This is the first act that works to dismantle Pryor's autonomy. Still and Williamson treat Ginnie as if the decision of where she and her children will go is up to her. This infuriates Pryor and slightly emboldens Ginnie. Williamson calmly states to Ginnie,

You are entitled to your freedom according to the laws of Pennsylvania, having been brought into the state by your owner. If you prefer freedom to slavery, as we suppose

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Johnson emancipated herself and her two children, Daniel and Isaiah, by walking away from her owner John Wheeler while aboard a steamboat in Philadelphia in 1855. Johnson and her children were headed to Nicaragua where Wheeler had been appointed to serve as U.S. Minister. Johnson was assisted in her escape by the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and the group's officers, Passmore Williamson and William Still.

everybody does, you have the chance to accept it now...Madam, act calmly—don't be frightened by your master. You are as much entitled to your freedom as we are, or as he is. (44)

This moment in the action is remarkable as it demonstrates the first moment when Ginnie is yielded the opportunity to make a choice for herself and her children. Williamson informs Ginnie that her freedom is her option and responsibility—demystifying each of the moments when she has attempted to rely on Pryor to free her or her children. Narrating this moment in this way challenges the constructed identity Pryor has enjoyed up until this point in the text.

The stripping of Pryor's privilege and legal authority over Ginnie and her role as mother to her children sends the slave owner into a furious frenzy causing him to begin to yell his protest of the Vigilance committee's interference in his performance of power and patriarchal control at Ginnie. His desperation is clear as he pulls the most ruthless and powerful ploy he has to ensure Ginnie will assume her subjugated, subservient role, so that he can assume his. Pryor brings up Benjamin in arguing with Still and Williamson—a reference that is obviously meant to serve as a reminder to Ginnie of what she is sacrificing for her freedom. Looking directly at Ginnie while speaking to the Vigilance officers, Pryor quips, "Now. After her visit to New York, she wishes to return to her child, whom she has left in Virginia, from whom it would be hard, so hard, to separate her" (47). This last justification given by Pryor openly reveals his use of Benjamin as a guarantee that Ginnie would remain in his custody. He also assumes to understand the young woman's feelings as they associate to her proximity to her child—feelings he has ironically and purposely disregarded in forcing her to leave Benjamin for at least two years during the stay in Nicaragua. Here, Pryor references Ginnie's necessity to mother to persuade her when he is truly only concerned with her role as mammy—a role that sustains his very existence and identity.

Cary's narration juxtaposes Pryor's disingenuous concern about Ginnie's feelings towards leaving Benjamin by taking the reader into the mind of the character who laments that by choosing her freedom at this moment, "she was going to lose her baby boy...this knowledge came suddenly. It came like the devil and sat on her chest. Right in broad daylight. She couldn't breathe" (48). The text goes on to convey that by exiting the boat with her two oldest children and leaving Pryor, "she was giving up her boy, her best baby, easy and fat (48). Cary writes this moment as less of an evacuation of motherhood and more of a denial on Ginnie's part of racist patriarchy and its reliance on her projected social responsibility to the children she bore for her owner. While internally pining for Benjamin and loathing the idea of abandoning the opportunity to mother him in freedom, Ginnie decides to exit the boat with Etta and Mattie circumventing the devious mothering trap set for her by Pryor and his white, male privilege.

Jane Johnson also leaves a child behind to obtain her freedom in the historical account. However, at the time of her liberation, Johnson does not know the whereabouts of her eldest child as he had been sold before she became the property of the owner she leaves on the docks in 1855. In Ginnie, Cary complicates the escape by allowing the character to not only be aware of Benjamin's whereabouts but deliberate in her defiance to the manipulation enacted through the young boy's existence. Benjamin being the offspring of Ginnie and her owner and a forced sexual relationship adds meaningfully to Ginnie's choice to obtain her freedom without the young boy. While she has no say in him coming on the trip initially, she gains some sovereignty in deciding she will not allow him to be used as ploy in her own enslavement and that of her other children. Ginnie simultaneously resists (Benjamin) and embraces (Etta and Mattie) mothering. This part of Cary's narrative invokes sentiments feminist theorist Joy James describes as part of what black feminists sought to accomplish during the twentieth century.

Cary reclaims the image of the black mother as intentionally and unconventionally powerful by allowing Ginnie to resist being a mammy and embrace being a mother. James argues that “the fruits of black women’s labors” in combating social and systematic oppressions is often hidden by “depoliticizing representations that obscure their political contributions” such as the mammy character (38). James describes archetypes such as mammy as “commercial, stereotypical portrayals of black females” that “center on fetishized” caricatures of the black female existence (38). As a response to demeaning characterizations such as mammy, black feminists began distancing themselves from a general concept of Western feminism and started “seeking liberation” specifically for themselves and their communities by crafting “models of black female resistance to political, social, state, or gender dominance” (James 39). This comprehensive approach to freedom is illustrated with complexity in *The Price of A Child* with Ginnie’s movement away from her socially mandated role as an enslaved mistress and caregiver to children through the legalities of the subsequent trial and political speaking tour that validates her freedom.

Her public display defies the prevalent notions of black female identities during the time period (and perhaps beyond) for those on the ferry who witness the escape, Still and Williamson, as well as those who will meet her having only heard about the incident. Ginnie’s escape becomes symbolic for resistance.

She stands the physical height of Pryor opposite his position (both figuratively and literally) and achieves what The Combahee River Collective describes by affirming that, “Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads on them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways” (James 38). Everything in Ginnie’s characterization opposes Pryor

and white male supremacy more broadly. She is calmer, more thoughtful, more civilized. She characterizes herself in this way by referencing the animal kingdom and the tendency of even animals to sacrifice for freedom when she states, “Pryor had her caught in a trap but promised to let her leg go and put her in a box. A hawk would tear off its whole leg to get free. Even a scruffy old raccoon would have the dignity to chew off a toe if need be” (*The Price* 64). This quote paints Pryor with the cruel, immoral slave master label he works to disavow in his genteel gentleman performance and illustrates Ginnie as methodical, smart, and justified in her actions.

Ginnie’s autonomous mothering begins as she vacates the boat, Pryor’s ownership, and access to Benjamin. Throughout the rest of the text, Ginnie works to resist the grief of not being able to mother Benjamin while embracing the nuances of freely mothering Etta and Mattie. The constant realization of abandoning her youngest child weighs heavily on her. She correlates her guilt from the grueling choice to go after her freedom without Benjamin to the weight of the manual labor responsibilities performed by many enslaved people imagining herself as “the driver and the cart and the mule” (63). She goes on to further liken herself to “the yams in the cart...the dirt under the wheels and the water in the puddle next to it” (63). This metaphoric consideration points to the universal obligation and expectation of the black woman and agrees with Hurston’s Nanny character in her estimation that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston 14). Ginnie realizes that her performance as a subservient, obedient mammy is required for Pryor to act in his desired role. More globally, this points to an expectation placed on black women to act in roles of support to buttress white supremacy. The onus is placed upon her to sustain a system in which she has no power.

Ginnie considers her unjust social positioning as she reflects on her deep disdain for Pryor and the society that allows him to control her life and the lives of her children. She

correlates the contempt she feels for Pryor specifically in his role to ensnare her by using Benjamin as human ransom to the possible reason black women during her time period miscarried at such a high rate claiming that, “No wonder black women lost so many babies. Steady hate” (*The Price* 65). Ginnie’s startling conjecture here associates the social stress plaguing black women in all of their forced roles during American slavery with health disparities directly connected to mothering. While the rigors of living an enslaved and socially-oppressed existence very obviously possess the potential to challenge the healthy gestation of a child, Cary allows Ginnie to imply that it is not only the stress on the body that led to the slave women’s miscarriages, but the willful hatred of the system that entraps them. This notion places power back into the hands of the enslaved woman.

Ginnie’s assertion points to a choice made by the enslaved woman to hate her condition and, thus, will her body into refusal to birth a child into this system. The character goes on to hypothesize that enslaved mothers transmit this deep-seated hatred into their children who are born into slavery. She notes, “no wonder a man could drive for his owner for thirty years and then one day slit his throat and throw him, still shaking, onto the road. Hate in the care of fat little babies. Dripping into their milk” (*The Price* 65). In this, Ginnie suggests that black mammies who were allowed to nurse enslaved children possibly passed on the spirit of resistance through their breastmilk—situating the mammy role as one with mothering agency. Mother’s milk passed onto enslaved children as well as white ones very obviously did not possess any magical resistance potion. However, the bond that black women were able to forge with children they nursed created opportunities to employ those children, black and white, in acts of resistance that might secure their actual freedom or increase their liberties on the plantation. Osaki situates mother’s milk as “a symbolic representation of the bond” between mother and child in specific

relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in a way that resonates with Cary's narrative and this mention (24).

On the surface, mothering in slavery is paradoxical. Enslaved women were not allowed to mother. The choice to mother by enslaved women such as Ginnie is revolutionary in its very existence. Cary's text is filled with references to unconventional negotiation of mothering responsibility. Ginnie also begins to make distinctive choices about how she will mother her children upon obtaining her freedom that are in stark contrast to any mammy responsibilities she may have had during her bondage to Pryor. Ginnie's brand of motherhood manifests in ways that lead to her separating from her children at times, leaving them in the charge of others for extended amounts of time as well as establishing a sense of humanity in Etta and Mattie by using what she views as her inabilities to be a mother to Benjamin as an example. Once Ginnie is free from Pryor, one of her first acts is to rename herself. A third of the way through the novel, Ginnie's name becomes Mercer. Immediately after her liberation from Pryor, she is taken to a graveyard where she meets the Quick family—a predominant family of free Blacks in Philadelphia. The Quick family press the character to name herself—suggesting a sort of rebirth once she is free. This scene poetically takes place in a cemetery, so the site of the commemoration of death becomes the site of the birth of Mercer Gray. I will refer to the character as Mercer from this point on in the text.

Initially, Mercer chose the first name Mercy. This choice was meant to both memorialize and absolve her guilt for being free without her baby Benjamin. I am careful not to assert that Mercer leaves Benjamin for the choice to bring the young boy on the trip was never one that existed for her. She chooses freedom without the possibility of bringing Benjamin along to experience it as well. While I make this distinction, Cary writes the character in a way that does

not allow her to release herself from responsibility for Benjamin's continued bondage. She tells the Quick family that she would like her new first name to be Mercy because "Mercy would forgive her, if there was any forgiveness in the wide world and mercy enough in the heart of God, for leaving Bennie" (97). This decision to name herself Mercy (changed to Mercer by Harriet Quick to sound more elegant) portrays her as one who does not accept a victim identity. She assumes full responsibility for leaving Benjamin despite her lack of control in his movement and whereabouts. In this way, she removes Pryor from the very position of power that he uses to try to detain her.

Upon meeting the Quick family, Mercer and the reader are introduced to the distinct differences in the way motherhood has come to be considered by free black women of the time. Upon surveying the large family, Mercer notices "that nobody in the group and no one, as far as she could see, in the other picnicking party, not one, was pregnant, and it had struck her as strange" (95). Their freedom seems oddly tied to childlessness. This observation suggests Mercer's experiences as an enslaved woman as it relates to forced mothering. If the scene of women who are not pregnant is odd to the character, then she has become accustomed to black women being in constant states of childbearing only to relinquish their offspring to their owners and slavery—not being allowed to be mothers to them at all.

Whereas Mercer has chosen to free herself and truly become a mother with all of the rights and privileges of the role, many of the women in the Quick family view motherhood as bondage itself. One of the elder Quick women, Bea, provides a succinct justification to foregoing motherhood in the black community in stating, "Children on the farm make hands to work; children in the city make mouths to feed" (95). Bea's suggestion associates black childbearing as a tool of slave owners to staff their plantations. Instead of correlating



motherhood to an opportunity for freedom and autonomy as Mercer has, the Quick women (Zilpha, Della, Harriet, Bea, & Blanche) all describe the role in horrifying and repressive terms. Della bemoans having “had a terrible time” staying pregnant and the miscarriage of her first two children (101). Her sister-in-law Zilpha reminds her that after the births of her two surviving children Tyree and Harriet by saying, “Della, you swore you’d cut your throat before you had any more children” (95). And while Della comments that her youth was to blame for such finite comments about bearing children she picks up the conversation begun by Bea and warns Mercer, “Bea’s right about children... You mark my words, my dear. Keep your eye open. Because up here, and especially in the city, there are any number of influences on your children” (95). Della’s warning clarifies her angst about bearing and raising children as more tied to the social challenges and conditions of existing as black people and not the physical pain of childbearing.

Zilpha contributes to this clarification by noting her annoyance with younger women who complain about the pain of childbirth and disassociates any physical weakness in black women that would cause them to avoid childbearing. She recalls witnessing her niece (by marriage) Blanche during the birth of her only child which “did almost kill her” and shares that her own “wasn’t never so bad”—underscoring black female resilience by disavowing Blanche’s experience (100). Zilpha goes on to reflect on her own mother having died in childbirth after birthing her younger sister Bea:

When my mother had me... she tells me she had a ring of bumps right the way around her belly. And like a ring of pain. The bumps or whatever they was disappeared eventually, and she thought no more of ‘em. But lo and behold, Bea was born, and didn’t they come back and kill her dead? (101)

Zilpha points to her mother's resolve in the face of difficult gestation and delivery. A childless Bea demonstrates strength differently by adding in jest, "We shall live to be old women... 'cause we don't have to put up with that"—that being childbirth and children (101). The cynical and comical older woman makes an association to black women's survival and the lack of children.

This discussion about the safety for black women that lies in not becoming mothers is remarkable in Cary's 1996 text as relatively reputable new sources National Public Radio (NPR) and Cable News Network (CNN) have both recently released pieces detailing statistics that point to the danger of mothering while black. In a December 2017 article and podcast, NPR includes that "black mothers in the U.S. die at three to four times the rate of white mothers" and are "243 percent more likely to die from pregnancy- or childbirth-related causes" than their white counterparts (Kelly). In "Childbirth is killing black women: 'This is a national problem'," Jacqueline Howard notes that while "about 700 to 1,200 women die from pregnancy or childbirth complications" each year in the US, black women "are about three to four times more likely to die of pregnancy or delivery complications than white women" (Howard). The articles in both publications speak to the danger facing black women regardless of economic or education status as it relates to bearing children due to unequal treatment in medical facilities as well as the stress of existing within a society plagued with the remnants of racism—a system inaugurated by the institution of chattel slavery in the United States. While these articles reference statistics far-removed temporally from the world of Cary's text, "many social scientists and medical researchers agree, the problem isn't race but racism" (Kelly). Thus, the mention of black women being threatened by the act of giving birth due to social conditions that relegate them to the margins of consideration is worthwhile within this study of generational challenges plaguing black mothers.

Harriet Leigh Quick Wilson represents the most socially successful of all of the Quick women in the text. She is thirty-two years of age and “able to read and write Latin, accomplished in anatomy, arithmetic, geography, history, and literature” and recently widowed (101). Daughter to Della and niece to Bea and Zilpha, Harriet offers a smile as she reflects on being relieved to have “escaped without a baby” from her short-lived marriage—adding that “she did not want children of her own” (102). All the talk of childlessness and childbearing cause Mercer’s memory to race back to Benjamin and she remembers, “how much she bled after she’d had Benjamin, and how weak she was. She remembered that the tiredness would not lift as it had the first and second times. For months she took to sitting down every chance she could, even to chop an onion” (103). Mercer’s recollection of Benjamin’s birth and her postpartum experience with him connects her to the other women despite their disparate social pasts.

None of the Quick women have ever been enslaved. Demonstrating her distance from any knowledge of the enslaved woman’s mothering challenges, Zilpha says, “They tell us that black women in the fields work up to the day they deliver, and then they drop ‘em and keep right on going” (101). In a comment that is meant to celebrate the assumed remarkable strength of enslaved mothers, Zilpha misrepresents their experience altogether. Mercer mends this gap between enslaved and free black mothers by simply replying, “Well...they lie” (101). Her simple response debunks the myth of the enslaved woman’s superhuman strength and humanizes an entire population to the free women who have come to believe the misnomers of slave life themselves.

In these first moments of freedom, Mercer’s brand of mothering is forged. She begins to immediately assert her thoughts and opinions in a way she was unable to as an enslaved woman. This confidence and determination seeps into her mothering of Etta and Mattie. This is first

apparent when Mattie becomes ill on their first night with the Quick family. When the young boy comes down with a fever, Zilpha quite forcefully advises Mercer on how to care for the boy—"you better sponge 'im down" (106). Mercer is immediately resistant to Zilpha's suggestion and shares that she would prefer to "just wrap him up and let him sweat" (106). Zilpha condescends Mercer by questioning her knowledge for mothering her children and reductively assuming that she can relate to Mercer's past experiences of enslavement by completely ignoring Mercer's wishes and exclaiming, "Come on. The boy's burning up. You been living in a shack all your life, just like I used to. You think you know ever'thing there is to know? Just do like you're told" (107). To which, Mercer quickly replies, "Ma'am...I been given a lot of orders in my life. You understand what I'm sayin? (107). Mercer's defensive response to Zilpha's assumptions and offers of assistance evince her clumsy negotiation of her newfound "frantic freedom" (107). She is defiant of being relegated to the role of powerless mammy now that she has claimed her place as mother.

Ultimately, Mercer gives in to Zilpha's advice and works to cool Mattie's feverish body with cold, wet rags. The uncertainty she feels in her decision is made clear as she "prayed that she was doing right" to heal Mattie and prevent losing yet another child (107). As Mattie's condition improves and Mercer returns to bed with her children, she contemplates her contempt for the free women she has met. She admits to herself that because "they looked so comfortable...so cocksure that their men would protect them...and that their children would have rubber balls to throw," she resents them (108). Her resentment for other free black mothers causes her to contemplate her own identity in freedom and she muses that she had "always wanted to be free" which results in her instant indictment of her own mothering practice because "she'd said it; she'd said it and sold her own baby boy down the river with a mother's tongue"

(109). At each moment in the text where Mercer vehemently grasps at freedom, she is snatched back to her choice to be free without Benjamin. This reveals the “fragility of her freedom” and leads to the character making more daring sacrifices to secure her and her children’s identity as free people (159).

As the text and Mercer’s journey within freedom continues, she is forced to decide to separate from her remaining two children temporarily. Pryor is still pursuing her through legal proceedings, so she must guard against them being captured. This leads to her traveling to a remote area outside of Philadelphia and leaving Etta and Mattie in the city to live with different members of the Quick family. It is believed that splitting up the family for a short time would make them more difficult to identify and locate in the case Pryor enlisted the help of slave catchers. For most of the novel, Mercer mothers in absentia to stabilize her family’s freedom. However, her genuine concern for her children and persistence to be the one who makes choices about their lives is continuously apparent. She requires frequent updates on their health and well-being, inquires about their eating habits and studies, and sends instructions as to how she prefers for them to be cared for considering their distinct personalities. Mercer never allows for it to be assumed that she is not fully aware of her children’s needs. As the text progresses, this seems vital to her obtaining absolute freedom.

When she is moved farther away from her children to participate in abolition rallies and lectures, she observes how unsettled she is that she has not seen the children in two months—a concern that does not seem to interest the white female abolitionists like Eliza Ruffin with which she is traveling. Interestingly, the white women who encourage Mercer to advocate for the abolition of slavery fail to fully acknowledge her humanity as a mother and a woman. She is instead reduced to showing her scars from beatings that occurred during her enslavement and

there is no sympathy for her role as a mother to her two children. Although their sentiments on the enslavement of black people depart, these abolitionists deny Mercer motherhood to suit their cause in a way that is not dissimilar to Pryor.

The choice to mother as a crusading abolitionist complicated Mercer's narrative for white abolitionists. This inclusion in Cary's fictionalized telling of Jane Johnson's story links with the notion that "the identity of motherhood complicates race, class, and gender" outlined in Melina Abdullah's "Womanist Mothering" *Loving and Raising the Revolution*." In this work, Abdullah details the criticism acclaimed journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells received from white feminists like Susan B. Anthony for deciding to not only have children, but also bring her children along on speaking tours. Wells is noted to have proclaimed, "I honestly believe I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches"—an act that caused Anthony and other white feminists to "overtly question her commitment to the movement" (Giddings 369, Abdullah 57).

Mercer is met with similar opposition from those who were supposed to serve as allies to her freedom and the freedom of other men and women like her. Yet, for all the effort Mercer makes to include stories of her mother and how she negotiated mothering while enslaved, she is ashamed to share the circumstances behind her freedom that are associated with motherhood—having left Benjamin. Mercer fundamentally feels that sharing what happened with her youngest child will yield harsh criticism from white abolitionists. She confides this fear in Tyree Quick weeping, "I left my baby in Virginia. Oh, God help me...I can't tell them that. I can't tell them that. I can't, Ty. I can't bear it. I had to tell it in court. I can't bear to say it again" (*The Price* 216). While it is a scenario she has played over and over in her head and shared with other free

blacks, sharing it with white audiences fills her with anxiety. Despite this unfortunate experience, Mercer centers mothering in her quest for freedom.

Although Mercer denies most white audiences the opportunity of gazing on her shame for leaving baby Bennie, one of the most noteworthy aspects of her brand of mothering in freedom is her deliberate sharing of her mindset surrounding Benjamin's absence in their free lives. Upon being reunited with her children after spending time in the countryside to protect the privacy of their whereabouts, Mercer encourages her children to consider family at the center of their freedom. She reassures Etta that although she was forced to leave Benjamin, she has no plans of leaving them for freedom's sake as she shows below:

I tried to make Pryor let me bring Bennie when we came north, but they wouldn't. And once he took us to Nicaragua, Etta, there wasn't no telling when we'd have another chance at freedom, or when we'd get back to Bennie, either. I'm not gonna leave you if I can possibly help it. But I'm not gonna lie to you, either. Things could happen. God only knows what could happen. In the meantime, if something was to happen to me, I'm tryin to make sure you two have friends in this world who'll do right by you...Anything happen to me, you keep ya'll together, if you can, sugar. See how the Quick family stays together? That's the way you two stay together; put your money together; work together.

And pray for your brother Bennie. Aunt Suzy's raisin him now. Pray for him. (209)

As she continues to mourn her indefinite separation from Benjamin, Mercer passes on mothering obligation to her daughter in the event that the social oppression that has caused her to leave her youngest child plague the family again.

Mercer is fully aware that although she has attained freedom, her liberated status is limited. This also makes her mother status conditional and controlled to a certain degree by a

dominant white supremacist society. Her awareness of this leads her to guide her daughter in a way that her own mother had not—revolutionizing the mother role for her family’s sake. She advises and encourages Etta just as Suzy does Ginnie early on in the text. Her instructions for Etta to keep their family together also include Benjamin. Although Mercer realizes they will likely never see him again, she urges the young girl to defy the spatial boundaries enslavement has placed between them by praying for and remembering Benjamin as her brother. Mercer’s constant pining for baby Benjamin and frequent visceral displays of emotion over having left him tie her to a humanity denied her by her previous owner and the mammy characterization.

Mercer’s work to further strengthen the bond of her divided family depicts her humanity and further negates the characterization of the enslaved as subhuman. It is evident that Mercer has not callously left or forgotten Benjamin in the ways she attempts to lessen the distance between the children she is able to take to freedom and the one she cannot. Evidence of this lies in her sharing with Mattie, “I want you to love your brother Bennie too, even though he’s not with us” (213). She is not only working to maintain their kinship with their lost brother; she is embedding human decency into her children in a way she would not have been able to had they been raised in captivity. If her efforts are successful, their sentimentalities will resist the commonly-held misconception that black people were devoid of such emotions especially as it related to family. In making her leave Benjamin, Pryor denies Mercer’s humanity—detaching her from any emotional connection to her child. In anguishing over Benjamin’s loss, Mercer demonstrates more humanity than Pryor or any other slave owner.

Mercer resists the mis-classification of enslaved people through her mothering practice. The planter class discredited and disposed of enslaved lives frequently, but Mercer depicts the value in the lives of her children and her role in their lives throughout the action. Through her



mothering act of caring genuinely for and guarding her children, she is more humane than her previous owner and the entire class of people who captured, owned, and sold other humans. Her mothering actions resist the basis to justify the trade of African people and separation of enslaved families and, thus, continue slavery perpetually.

Much like Saffronia in the beginning of this chapter, Mercer is stranded between two worlds for the majority of the text—bondage and freedom. One is chosen for her and the other she chooses by force. In her world, society demands a price for black motherhood. Throughout the text, Benjamin is repeatedly referred to as the price of Mercer's freedom. Choosing freedom without figuring a way to include Benjamin is the cost she pays to be a mother to Etta and Mattie. For daring to demand that she is able to care for and raise her own children, she loses one altogether. The pain she feels at the thought of Benjamin's loss is tangible to the character and compared to that of a miscarriage. This pain that mothers who have biologically lost babies feel is not only associated with Ginnie's impending loss of Benjamin; it is also connected to her fear of never grasping her freedom. Ginnie feels the lack of freedom "somewhere inside, cramping, threatening, like a miscarriage" (*The Price* 20). Mercer never truly attains freedom because of her association of mothering to freedom. In the moments where she is most free, she is mothering. Benjamin's absence allows for continued control by Pryor although he ultimately loses his claim to legally own her. Like actual black women before her and who will come after her, Mercer "remain[s] to resist" and fashions resistance through aspects of motherhood (263). Cary's narration of the complex nuances that accompany the black mother figure particularly during chattel slavery in America provides a counternarrative to the oversimplified stereotype of black motherhood—thoroughly distinguishing mothers from mammies.

#### **CHAPTER 4: COUNTING CHICKEN AND CHILDREN: MOTHERING THE STOMACH IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

My grandmother counted chicken. In the process of preparing Sunday dinner (the only day meat was included in the family meal), she would speak each of her six children's names as she cut a whole raw chicken into pieces to fry. She never spoke her own name. Ensuring each child would receive a whole piece of the bird for themselves meant that she would not. So, she ate chicken backs. At my grandmother's funeral, my mother (her youngest child and only daughter) confessed that she had always assumed that her mother had preferred to eat the backs of the chickens she prepared—the pieces with the scarcest meat and skin. She only realized in adulthood that her mother ate what was left after her children had been fed. My mother chose to tell this story out of every memory she had of her mother because it revealed the depth, practicality, and consistency of my grandmother's sacrificial mothering practice. She counted chicken.

My mother and her siblings were completely unaware of their mother's sacrifice. It was cloaked in the myth that my grandmother simply enjoyed the back of the chicken. She did not broadcast the intricacies of her expression of love and will power. She simply performed sacrificial mothering and those she fed were never fully privy to how their full bellies necessitated hers being almost empty. It is this understated act of mothering with and through food that links Chimamanda Adichie's inaugural novel *Purple Hibiscus* to this discussion of mothering as a means of resistance. In previous chapters, we have seen how black women have occupied the traditional confines of motherhood and fashioned ways to shape ordinary

convention into activism that protected and nurtured entire families and communities. This mothering activism not only set black motherhood apart, but highlighted the black female experience in new ways that relate to social power. Forgoing a meal in order to provide for another life is a revolutionary act.

My grandmother's legacy is deeply associated with the food she prepared and how she shared her food knowledge, recipes, and meals. Through the many testimonials from people who joined us to mourn her death, we realized that she touched generations through food. Some remembered the meal she had prepared for them when they were unable to feed themselves. Others recalled how she expressed condolences or congratulations with one of her perfect pound cakes or a jar of her homemade plum jelly. The social conditions of the mid-twentieth century American South limited her occupational opportunities to domestic servitude. She used recipes passed down through generations of our family to support her own family by cooking for white employers. The explicit difference in the meals she prepared for work and the meals she cooked at home was the purpose of those meals and the space in which they were prepared. When she cooked in her own kitchen, she possessed a power that did not exist for her in the kitchens of white families. As many exhibited at her memorial service, she took pride in the sacrifices she made with food. By differentiating the ways she prepared meals for her employers versus her family, she was able to withhold the sacredness of her food from those who did not deserve to experience the depth of her identity. Thus, she wrested power through a dynamic that should have seemingly relegated her to the margins of society and disempowered her all together.

Asserting that food and cooking exist as a source of power for black women has been a polarizing argument among critics and scholars. During the 1960s, many black nationalists saw the food and cooking practices that became distinct to the black community as oppressive to

health and counterproductive to disavowing Western influence on black lives. Stephan Palmié notes that “African American foodways—especially the culinary complex known as ‘soul food’—have been subject to explicit and often highly self-conscious politicization” (54). Critics of the connection between food and power for the black community find that “eating corn bread, collard greens, ham hocks, or chitterlings by itself does not constitute an assertion or rejection of certain identities, subject positions, or visions of collective history” (Palmié 54). That is to say, they are skeptical or completely opposed to situating food as symbol of cultural identity and history for black people.

In like manner, some black feminists have gone further to resist correlations between black female autonomy and food—claiming that it conjures up images of mammy. Psyche Williams-Forsson acknowledges the angst many black feminists and “black reformers” possess about concentrating on this link (80). This anxiety is connected to the “need for positive representation and imagery” for black women that moves them away from mammy imagery in the dominant narrative (80).

Whereas black women, especially in the United States, have been repressively tied to the function of cooking and feeding, many theorists and activists find it dangerous to embrace any aspect of this dynamic for fear of reinforcing this limited consideration of the black female experience. This is understandable considering that associating cooking skill and responsibility with black women can prove to be offensively reductive or as Williams-Forsson explains, “Black women’s cooking abilities have always been connected to mammy imagery—sometimes in the process of cooking chicken” (80). However, critics like Gloria Wade-Gayles argue that despite being forced into domestic roles, namely cooking, black women in America “converted what might have been a demand into a desire, a responsibility into a joy, a task into a talent” and the

kitchen came to represent a space for them “to work, to serve, to think, to meditate, and to bond with one another” (97). Gayles situates cooking as a responsibility that allowed black women specifically to attain social power and the kitchen a place they could exercise that power and dominate. Arguably, there was no other space like it for black women—a place where they “experienced influence, authority, achievement, and healing” (97). From chattel slavery and into the twentieth century, the kitchen has existed as a space where black women have had the power to create and exist without oppressive supervision. In those kitchens, they created recipes that sustained histories and prepared meals that soothed the trauma of oppression. Through food, they defiantly mothered lives that white supremacy attempted to erase and hegemonic narratives thrust into the margins.

Adichie strikes a meaningful balance in *Purple Hibiscus* that allows for her female characters to embrace the historical link to cultural foodways and wrest power in situations and environments set up to demean their very existence. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie reimagines projected social roles and creates mother characters who resist dominant power structures and strengthen their communities through food and feeding. Instead of eschewing the roles of mother and provider of nourishment altogether, the women and characters in *Purple Hibiscus* merge the two roles and refashion them to manifest a self-determined existence.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, sacrifice associated with mothering is varied. In chapter two, we examined how Zala transformed her motivation to save her own child into resistance that motivated her entire community and unpacked Mercer’s defiance of the mothering responsibility forced onto enslaved women in chapter three. This chapter focuses on one of the most visible ways to witness this level of sacrifice—food and feeding—through the methods employed by female characters in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. The mothers of the

text demonstrate emotion through food—some endearing and some hateful. In either regard, the women exhibit power in circumstances where they have been rendered powerless.

My grandmother's chicken counting was less her succumbing to a mammy stereotype and more of her demonstration of "food management skills" and sacrifice (Williams-Forson 85). Oftentimes, she would even forego the meager chicken back if an unexpected neighborhood child or relative showed up around mealtime. There was never any question of denying unwanted or uninvited guests a seat at her table and a portion of the meal. This was a practice that continued into my lifetime and I watched countless friends and strangers come and go around dinner time at my grandmother's home because they knew she would feed them. Williams-Forson attributes this dynamic to more than generosity. The writer asserts "food sharing and networking were ways in which women reached out in collective unity to help themselves and others survive amidst the rapidly changing conditions of their lives" (Williams-Forson 85). Williams-Forson's book title was inspired by the rich and nuanced statement of Isabella Winston that her "mother paid for this place [their family home] with chicken legs" (Williams-Forson 1). This statement contextualizes the correlation of black women, mothering, and food to resistance of cultural definition and restriction. My grandmother and others manipulated roles meant to diminish their identities in order to improve their social and financial conditions and contribute to their larger community. As the result, they were able to purchase property, provide for their families, and establish themselves within their fields and communities. They mothered through the stomach.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie provides examples in Beatrice and Ifeoma of mothers who experience oppression through food and defy their social debasement with food. Trapped in an abusive marriage, Beatrice only possessed control in the kitchen. In every other room of her

house, she is berated and beaten by her husband Eugene. The kitchen is the only room in the Achike household that Eugene does not enter during the course of the novel. Although Beatrice does not prepare most of the meals in her kitchen, she still controls the meals by directing the actions of the family's cook Sisi—telling her to “put a little more palm oil in the soup” and “a little less curry in the coconut rice” (*Purple Hibiscus* 10). The small moments that we witness of Beatrice's agency happen around food and feeding her children. In moments where she resists Eugene's abuse, she takes over the kitchen to either prepare food or exact justice. It is ultimately a miscarriage that results from one of the many beatings she suffers at her husband's hands that leads her to exact violent revenge on Eugene. This revenge is taken through food. Iniobong I. Uko argues that Adichie “reverse[s] the course of nature” by writing Beatrice as “a mother, the bearer and nurturer of life, to be the one that terminates life” (57). Uko goes on to assert that in this inclusion, Adichie embeds a “twist in the role of the mother” that is “the mutation, the alteration that opens up a vista of issues” for the traditional concept of motherhood in *Purple Hibiscus* (57).

There are a number of themes in *Purple Hibiscus* that drive the action of the text, but I assert that food, meals, and eating are most prominent. Adichie guides readers and perhaps the global market at large into a new way of thinking about Nigeria and female agency in her home country by centering food in *Purple Hibiscus*. Food, in essence, shapes and tells the story of the novel and mothers are the navigators of this simultaneously simple and complicated theme. There is a dedicated focus on the profound effect mothering has on food and feeding in this text. By embedding foodways distinct to Igbo culture in this novel that would go on to achieve global acclaim, Adichie resists the notion that Africa is the starving continent devoid of cultural sophistication and nuance. Rather, she tells a story of hunger that goes beyond the stomach.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie exposes elements of contemporary Nigerian culture that continue to oppress and marginalize women and embeds solutions for resistance in roles traditionally linked to women across African culture—cooking, feeding, and mothering. In “Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History,” Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber conclude that “studying the relationship between women and food can help us to understand how women reproduce, resist, and rebel against gender constructions as they are practiced and contested in various sites” (2). The use of food in *Purple Hibiscus* provides for a more profound understanding of the trauma, marginalization, and liberation efforts on the part of the women in the text. Using food to enhance the action of a text narrated by a young Nigerian woman aligns with current trends that link feminist studies and food; however, Adichie is innovative in approaching food through a strictly Nigerian lens.

Global discussions on the culinary arts rarely, if ever, include Nigeria. Nigerian food writer Yemisí Aríbisálà claims that this is because “the world has not met Nigerian food” (1). Aríbisálà goes on to assert that “till 2013, Nigerian food did not exist internationally” and “the person of Nigerian food did not exist nationally” (1). Aríbisálà’s statements about the absence of Nigerian food in the most popular discourse about global cuisines and foodways is accurate. She attributes this, in part, to Nigerians’ failure to possess and market their food in the way that other diasporic cultures have that has proved particularly profitable. One would more readily find an Ethiopian, Jamaican, or Moroccan restaurant anywhere in the world well before you would find an establishment serving Nigerian cuisine. Even in the most progressive food studies, Nigeria is either not present or lumped together with other West African culinary traditions. It is rare that Nigeria’s distinct food identity is highlighted. Adichie resists this gastrographic erasure of her



native home in *Purple Hibiscus* with the frequent mention and dominant presence of food throughout the narrative.

Adichie not only specifically incorporates Nigerian food, the author complicates its meaning by illustrating how the same meals differ in homes with abundant access to food and homes experiencing lack. The Achike household has a bounty of food because of Eugene's success. As the result, their meals are overflowing with juicy meats and fresh vegetables. Eugene's sister, Ifeoma, is far less affluent after having tragically lost her husband and being furloughed by the government-run university. The meals in her home are sparse as she negotiates her meager resources to feed her three children. While both homes serve distinctly Nigerian versions of fufu and jollof rice, the nourishment or malnourishment is not dependent on the actual food, but behind the emotion of the parties who prepare the meals. The home with plenty is deficient in healthy human interaction and emotional support while the home with little food is rich with encouragement and safety.

Adichie also uses food to underscore the convictions and personalities of her characters. Ifeoma's defiance and indictment of the presence of repressive patriarchy in both Nigeria's traditional and contemporary societies is presented through her dealings with food. Despite having an affluent brother, Ifeoma refuses any support from Eugene to help feed her children when she is widowed and jobless. She rejects Eugene's patriarchal and imperialist presence in her home and refuses to feed her children with his food. Even when Eugene's children, Kambili and Jaja, visit her, she is reluctant to accept the food he sends with them. She only receives the edible gifts when they are offered by Beatrice—her sister-in-law and a mother.

Ifeoma's character is also made whole by the mention of meal times in her home. As a woman with a career outside of the home (unlike Beatrice), Adichie constructs a versatile female

activist in Ifeoma who can communicate her protest as a faculty member at the university and as a mother who teaches her sons and daughter how to prepare meals that consider both their economic needs and cultural heritage. Adichie charts new territory by placing traditional Nigerian food at the forefront of her narrative. Like mothering, food serves an obvious practical purpose; however, Adichie entangles and employs both in a manner that demonstrates the potential of each to move beyond sustaining life—into the realm of sustaining spirit.

This chapter focuses more on Ifeoma because of her overwhelming dependence on mothering and mothering through food. Although she is not the only mother in this text, her deliberate use of foodways to influence positive familial and social shifts make her ideal to unpack in this discussion. Ifeoma does not only act as the mother figure that soothes and saves the main character Kambili's life; she mothers other young men and women at moments when she experiences the most overwhelming lack of resources (namely food). As this chapter will demonstrate, Ifeoma's mode of mothering is wholly resistant to the restrictive and patriarchal constraints of her culture that are represented most through her brother Eugene and her position at the university. Food at the center of her resistance provides a complex picture of the usefulness of struggle to resist the structures that create the need for struggle in the first place.

Chimamanda Adichie's unique African and American transnational identity allows for a discussion of her use of food that connects African and African American foodways. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Adichie left her home country to attend university as a young adult. She now splits her residential time between Nigeria and the United States each year. Adichie's nuanced positioning in terms of cultural identity and global notoriety contributes meaningfully to this discussion of transnational mothering resistance and food. Although she is Nigerian by nationality, Adichie's career trajectory deviates from many of her Nigerian predecessors and

contemporaries. She is among the league of Nigerian writers considered to be part of the third generation—producing what Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton describe as “new Nigerian writing” in their special edition of *Research on African Literature* in 2005 (VII). Pius and Dunton assert that it had been necessary to separate writers like Adichie out from the Nigerian writers of the mid and late twentieth century for scholarly analysis because “while the work of third-generation authors was receiving considerable journalistic coverage—within Nigeria and to some extent elsewhere—hardly any sustained scholarly attention had yet been paid to this corpus” (VII). Her Western identity far surpasses Buchi Emecheta’s. Her attendance of college and graduate school in the United States has guided her along the path of other “young American writers” (Hewett 74). She has published her short stories in prestigious American journals and *Purple Hibiscus* was published by Algonquin press in North Carolina. Currently, Adichie also enjoys remarkable success in the realm of Western popular culture. Disparate from any other Nigerian writer, Adichie is featured on one of American pop artist Beyoncé’s most recent albums. Thus, Chimamanda Adichie reflects a unique transnational identity that proves valuable in considering the kindred threads among communities separated and connected by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Her life and work both demonstrate a dialogue between West African communities and identities and those of Black Americans.

Adichie’s transnational identity is clearly present in *Purple Hibiscus*. While the novel is written with an obvious awareness of a vast global audience, Adichie’s inclusion of distinct elements of Nigerian Igbo culture ground the narrative contextually. While readers from various backgrounds will be able to relate to the characters, they cannot escape the realization that this is a Nigerian story set in Africa. Her inclusion of Igbo language joins the incorporation of food culture in producing a counternarrative that resists negative associations and depictions of

African people. In this way, Adichie joins the work of literary predecessors like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa, Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare and others who began publishing after Nigerian independence.

These Nigerian writers and poets produced bodies of work that were marked by sophistication and cultural depth and, thus, challenged the widely accepted narrative of Nigeria as a post colony that was lost before colonization and would fail after colonization. Heather Hewett situates Adichie amongst the third generation of Nigerian writers who emerged after the country's independence to tout their national "triumph over adversity" and pen a collective "story of courageous individuals refusing to be silenced" (74). The writer, who lives six months in Baltimore and six months in Lagos, produces characters and situations through which food (among other cultural elements) constitutes a "transnational intertextuality" among communities of the African Diaspora (Belasco 75). The frequent mention of food in *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates the complexity of culinary metaphors in understanding the resistance of disenfranchised and formerly colonized and enslaved people.

In "Breaking Gods: An African Postcolonial Gothic Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*," Lily Mabura considers Adichie's writing as a "Gothic cultural reclamation project" that resists the biased imaging of an impoverished, famished Africa—bolstering the strength and resilience of this postcolonial space (215). Mabura's analysis of Adichie's work celebrates the author's ingenuity as literary activism that reclaims an altered and desecrated image of the African community and its people and its literature. In one of her most popular talks *The Danger of A Single Story*, Adichie sees herself as a storyteller and asserts that "we are all vulnerable in the face of a story" and that storytelling is

so vital to the fabric of our existence that incomplete or singular stories pose a great danger to us (85). She claims that,

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (85)

A testament to her transnational acceptance, Adichie delivered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Eudora Welty Lecture in November 2017 in Washington D.C. by invitation of the Welty and Pen/Faulkner Foundations<sup>13</sup>. During this talk, she warned the audience, “don’t you dare believe anyone else’s story of who you are”—further evidence of her determination to control the narratives regarding her identity and the cultural identity of her home country.

This connection between Adichie’s work and her conviction to tell stories that authentically reflect her culture and resist oppressive misrepresentations is most present with the representation of food in *Purple Hibiscus*. Her frequent and detailed mentions of meal times, food choices, and the value of sharing food correlate identity with foodways. It is not novel to reflect a link between food and identity. Eighteenth-century gastronome Jean Brillat-Savarin declared that “to invite people to dine with us is to make ourselves responsible for their well-being for as long as they are under our roofs” (Brillat-Savarin 16). Regardless of cultural specificity, food is inherently linked to identity formation and preservation. The virtues of homeland and tradition most consistently and effectively ruminate from cuisine. Thus, it is ideal to seek kinship between mothering and food—both life-sustaining entities.

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<sup>13</sup> Adichie delivered this address at the Lincoln Theatre in Washington D.C. on November 8, 2017. While the lecture was re-aired on C-Span on November 25 and 26, there is currently no transcript available. I attended this lecture and have included quotations from my personal notes.

A discussion of the foodways of the African Diaspora must consider the connectedness of food for the population of descendants of formerly-enslaved African people. Food survived the Maafa (or the Middle Passage) like the over 11 million enslaved people who withstood the brutal voyages and inhumane conditions. With the people came their many diverse cultures and their food. What they remembered from the homes they would never see again; what would remind them of their humanity amid unfathomable oppression were, in part, the flavors and ingredients distinct to the identity of which they had been stripped. In essence, “food gives material expression to the ways exiles commemorate the past and shape new identities amid alien cultures, diets, and languages. Food is vested with symbolic ties to homelands left or lost” (Carney 185). Food is very obviously transnational and for African people has the potential of solidifying identities stripped away by imperialist domination.

The transplanting of African people from the western coast of the continent during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade separated populations from all aspects of their identity. Most of these elements disintegrated among the cultural cleansing of chattel slavery. Languages and histories were lost on the voyages across the Atlantic, but food was preserved. Along with millions of African lives, slavers also transported foods indigenous to African countries to sparingly nourish the human cargo. 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch slaver Willem Bosman (1688 to 1702) describes the customary meal for enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage as follows:

Their common Food is a pot full of ground Millet or Corn boiled to the consistence of Bread or instead of that Jambs [yams] and Potatoes; over which they pour a little Palm-Oyl, with boiled Vegetables and a little piece of stinking Fish (Carney 180).

This meal, described by the slaver with arguable disdain, is decidedly West African as well as distinct to many black American communities—cornbread, yams, boiled greens, and fish; this

could be today's lunch menu at any self-professed soul food or Southern food establishment in America and West African families might enjoy a derivation of this very cuisine today.

There are two remarkable moments here. The first is the acknowledgement in the slaver's description of the denial of sufficient meals served to enslaved people aboard slave ships. This act further substantiated their subhuman status. When you take away food, you deny humanity: "To be well fed [is] to have a stomach so full of food that hunger [is] kept at bay. To be hungry [is] to be reduced to the level of an animal, at least in the eyes of the well-off" (Wylie 27). Secondly, despite this absolute indifference for the people forced into slavery from the west coast of Africa, slavers left open the opportunity for this population and their descendants to reclaim their appropriated identity and forge a viable resistance to the systematic oppression of their new global home. Resistance through food and feeding became a necessary and practical means of survival for enslaved people in America. In *Hunger Overcome?: Food and Resistance in African American Literature*, Andrew Warnes posits that "if slaveholders could abject their African property by banishing them from their Edenic orchards, then slaves could launch Brer Rabbit-like forays that, by lifting 'the hardy apple' and 'the delicate orange' from predestined white mouths, reaffirm their own humanity" (Warnes 3). Adichie simultaneously touches on the ways in which Nigeria and its cultures (including food) has been marginalized by imperialism and the Western world while enacting a metaphoric Brer Rabbit revolt that reaffirms the humanity of Nigeria and its people. Adichie performs this reclamation by not only embedding distinct foodstuff and practices within her narrative, but also by refusing to intricately define the ingredients, dishes, and customs that might have been unfamiliar to a non-Igbo and non-Nigerian readership. She resists the urge by the global literary market to explain herself and her culture and allows the humanity of the characters and their culture to speak for themselves.

Within *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie fights to produce a full depiction of Nigeria which, for many Western readers, serves to characterize all of Africa in a postcolonial world that views the continent as a monolith of famine and disease. Warren Belasco posits that “a cuisine helps a society’s members define themselves...to eat appropriate foods is to participate in a particular group” (Belasco 44). This considered, food yields power to populations cast out of a society and generates a space of belonging. In terms of the ways food connects to our comprehension of our own identity and the world around us, Uma Nayaran suggests, “thinking about food has much to reveal about how we understand our personal and collective identities” (1). Many historical and contemporary depictions of Africa characterize the continent as a “place of hunger and starvation...long kept alive by food imported from parts of the world” (Carney 7). This is a gross misrepresentation of the continent and represents epistemic violence against an entire culture.

Africa has long been home to a wealth of agricultural riches such as the “more than two thousand native grains, roots, tubers, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and oil crops” that grow indigenously on the continent and are enjoyed globally (Carney 7). The continent and its people “have contributed more than one hundred species to global food supplies [such as] sorghum, coffee, watermelon, black-eyed peas, okra, palm oil, the kola nut, tamarind, hibiscus, and a species of rice” (7). Widely known consumer products such as Coca-Cola, Palmolive soap, Worcestershire sauce, Red Zinger tea, Snapple and most soft drinks rely in part on plants domesticated in Africa. However, these contributions “are largely unacknowledged and seldom appreciated” in the global consciousness (7). In the popular imagination, Africa and its people are nutritionally deficient and hungry—“chronically unable to feed” themselves and “continually requir[ing] massive infusions of charity to keep” from starving all together (1). In the eyes of the



Western world, Africa is a malnourished child. Adichie refutes this offensive misrepresentation and illustrates other elements of life that can render a soul starving. The individuals who metaphorically starve to death in *Purple Hibiscus* have plenty of food. Their dependence on Western culture is the source of their malnourishment.

Adichie writes against the biased, infantilized image of a famished Africa with the incorporation of native foods and recipes that enlighten the reader to the rich agricultural and culinary heritage of the continent—bolstering the strength and resilience of this postcolonial space. In *Purple Hibiscus*, hunger is attached to circumstances of postcolonial social injustice not African essence in general. Although enslaved Africans were purposely starved as a means of further dehumanizing the population, the persistence of foodways distinct to the cultural heritage from which they were captured reveals a resistance against complete cultural annihilation.

It is compulsory to highlight the foodways of global spaces whose histories are overwhelmed with cultural domination and the erasure of traditional custom in order to adequately illuminate what has been darkened by dominant discourse unconcerned with the resilience necessary to thwart global adversity. Adichie crafts a foodscape that amplifies the voices of a demographic whose stories suffer frequent malnourishment in the dominant narrative. Heavily peppering her text with cooking practices, indigenous ingredients, and distinct foodways focuses the reader's attention on the role sustenance plays in the profound understanding of the link between the struggle and the stomach. Warnes asserts that "twentieth-century authors link cooking and writing together because they...identify both as cultural processes by which inequalities resulting from racial injustice can be eroded and even, eventually overcome" (2). Despite the residual shroud of white dominance and supremacy that cloaks postcolonial areas in

the twenty-first century, instances of foodways exemplify the text's characters' ability to assert agency and attain solace via edible provisions. This avenue of resistance is presented distinctly through the mothers of this text—most specifically Ifeoma.

Mothering and food are comprehensively linked in this text. Both of these aspects of life forge together to situate a resistance practice against what plagues the characters and their community. Neither Adichie nor I argue that there is an inherent link between women and cooking. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie ties the association with women and cooking to socialization as opposed to any natural predilection. She sarcastically muses,

Today, women in general are more likely to do housework than men—cooking and cleaning. But why is that? Is it because women are born with a cooking gene or because over the years they have been socialized to see cooking as their role? I was going to say that perhaps women *are* born with a cooking gene until remembered that the majority of famous cooks in the world—who are given the fancy title of ‘chef’—are men. (*We Should All Be Feminists* 35)

In a more succinct and more sardonic manner, the author addresses the notion that women are inherently linked by society to the responsibility of cooking and feeding (specifically as it relates to children) in *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. There she notes, “The knowledge of cooking does not come pre-installed in a vagina” (15). So, Adichie is clear in her literary activism not to celebrate traditional gender roles that hinder women and girls from traversing into spheres from which they are typically isolated. However, there is a clear link between the use of food to heal, nurture, and soothe social trauma and mothering practice in *Purple Hibiscus*. What prevents the text from the appearance of a problematic ideal for women (cooking and feeding) is the ingenuity and deliberateness of these female characters in their use

and manipulation of food. They appear to occupy a traditional role assigned to women yet they locate unexpected ways to exhibit agency.

For centuries, African women have manipulated their assigned social roles into avenues to resist and exercise power. Cooking and food exists as ways this has been achieved. Black women across the transnational spaces discussed in this study wrest power while continuing to seemingly operate in their accepted gender roles. These women establish and maintain a sense of cultural identity and social status in environments that do not fully recognize their worth and humanity. This dynamic is evident across historical and popular culture.

I mentioned how Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* contributes to a problematic association of black women and food power in chapter one. While I find *The Help* fundamentally racist, one of the most remarkable inclusions in that text is the use of food by black female characters as social capital. Minnie, one of the black domestic workers on which the text is focused, is known throughout the setting of the novel (Jackson, Mississippi) for her outstanding cooking skills. To the white community, those able to hire her, Minnie's "cooking is the best in town"—namely her fried chicken (Stockett 33). The character even quips to her white female employer, "I ain't burning no chicken"—underscoring her awareness of the value the white community places on her skill and her need to protect her only access to gainful employment (44). This yields Minnie employment that helps her take care of her five children alongside her husband Leroy.

Digression to mention this popular text is worthwhile because of its authorship. As a white woman whose family had a black cook and caregiver, Stockett is fully aware of the value of these skills for black women in the time when the novel was set. This is part of the identity that these women from a disparate and disenfranchised community allowed white communities to see. Real life Minnies showed only the part of themselves that was profitable to an oppressive

world that dictated their social status—protecting what they held sacred for themselves and their insular community to provide for themselves and their families. In the case of characters like Minnie, this was food.

The complicated relationship between black women and food preparation runs deep across transnational borders. Adichie draws upon this dynamic by placing food and female identities at the center of *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel possesses complex and equitable inclusions of black women connecting through and to cooking and food.

Black women working through food and cooking to establish security and place for their families and communities has deep transnational roots. In *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, Michael W. Twitty links the cooking practices of African American people to West African culinary traditions. In his chapter “Mother of Slaves,” Twitty acknowledges that much of the cooking techniques and ingredients distinct to southern American fare derive from West African cooking tradition. He notes that the women who were charged with preparing food for their owners and the larger plantation negotiated “cooking pots of new life, using their collective knowledge and experience to make something that would soothe their exile—in tongues 3,500 miles apart with different stories of how they came to be irrevocably enslaved in an alien land” (Twitty 163). The food historian goes on to assert what has come to be known as southern food or soul food as unequivocally linked to “what is now southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon (the Igbo, Ibibio, Moko, Efik, and their neighbors) and southern and central Ghana (the Akan, Ewe, and Ga)” (171). Twitty’s mapping of the origins of enslaved Africans brought to the American South underscores the transnational link between the contemporary foodstuffs and practices of African

American food tradition (like that of my grandmother) and many of the items mentioned in Adichie's text.

Twitty's mention of the gardens of Igbo people during the Transatlantic slave trade invokes the horticultural tone of Adichie's text. He highlights Captain Hugh Crow's notation of the Bonny<sup>14</sup> trading post. Crow's observation of this post according to Twitty notes that "the Igbo kept native fruit trees near their dwellings" and gardens with okra, cowpeas, red peppers, and "leafy greens, including members of the amaranth family; and bitter leaf, from which a soup was made" (Twitty 174). Like Adichie, Twitty details the Igbo with a distinct cultural practice that does not condescend their existence. This inclusion paints the group as resourceful and thoughtful in terms of culinary practice and custom. Adichie builds upon this history in her novel with the frequent and detailed mention of food placement, preparation, and consumption. In the text, the character focused upon for her mothering activism through food—Ifeoma—relies upon her garden to supplement her family's meals. The reader learns "Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence" caused by the heavy-handed subjugation that takes place in the text (*Purple Hibiscus* 16).

When we first meet the Achike family, they are preparing for a family meal. Kambili Achike—a prepubescent Nigerian girl—narrates the story. Her mother, Beatrice, is the first mother we meet in this text and although this chapter focuses mostly on Ifeoma, Beatrice serves as an example of the way in which women experience oppression through various modes including food. Beatrice also exhibits brief moments of resistance through food, but those instances are often tragic and, thus, not completely revolutionary or a deviation from the oppression she is resisting. Her character juxtaposes Ifeoma's. Ifeoma is the sister of Kambili's

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<sup>14</sup> "An Ijo slave-trading port in which many Igbo lived and from which thousands of enslaved Igbo were exported to the Americas" (Twitty 174).

father Eugene Achike. Eugene represents the essence of imperialist power and manipulation. Notably, most of Eugene's abusive power is demonstrated through his use of food and his control of mealtimes. Much of the mothering through food resistance we witness through Ifeoma is arranged against Eugene and what he represents. We come to this profound understanding of how they symbolize problematic postcolonial identities through food.

Before the Achike family begins the first meal of the action, Kambili introduces the reader to the custom of the "love sip" (*Purple Hibiscus* 8). Before each family meal, Eugene would offer his two children, Kambili and her brother Jaja, a sip of his tea "because you shared the little things you loved with the people you loved" (8). This seemingly tender moment is filled with symbolism that assists in further understanding the problems plaguing the Achike family and Nigeria at large. The effect of the hot tea on the young girl's tongue also foreshadows two distinctly tragic moments in the text—Eugene's physical abuse of his children and his murder.

Kambili's description of the tea she shares with her father is key. Eugene drinks Lipton tea which is British and, in his mind, an essential fixture in his attempt to align his identity with all things colonial and Western. Unlike the populations that I argue fortify their identities through the perpetuation of cultural foodways, Eugene further strengthens the hands of an absent oppressor by continuing the meal practice of an entity that conquered many aspects of Nigeria's cultural identity just a century before. Additionally, Kambili's adoration of her physically- and emotionally-abusive father has undertones of the masses of dispossessed, disenfranchised people and the tease and torment of their attempt to connect to a dominant identity of which they are fundamentally not a part. The "love sip" of Lipton tea figuratively illustrates the colonial experience and the searing effects on the post-colony and its inhabitants:

A love sip, he called it, because you shared the little things you loved with the people you loved. Have a love sip, he would say, and Jaja would go first. Then I would hold the cup with both hands and raise it to my lips. One sip. The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered. But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me. (8)

The father's food sharing performs the opposite of what mothering through food does in this text.

Kambili's sipping her father's "too hot" tea as a professed act of love ironically foreshadows the abuse that the young girl and her brother undergo at the hands of a father who beats, burns, and berates them throughout the majority of the text (8). Like colonial oppressors who purportedly brought progress and civilization to the nations they occupied by military and economic force, Eugene forces his ideals onto his children and attempts to separate them from as many traditional Nigerian cultural practices as possible in the name of advancement. Adichie symbolizes the harsh cultural tension caused by colonialism and imperialism with Kambili's tongue being tormented by the mingling of the scorching British tea and the spicy Nigerian food. Further establishing the significance of paying attention to food as a potential tool for oppression in order to position it as a means of liberation later in the text, Adichie skillfully lures her readership into a palatable understanding of the overwhelmingly complicated dynamic of postcolonial trauma through food at this moment in the text.

The use of food allows Adichie to communicate transnationally in line with Warren Belasco's idea that "like language, a cuisine is a medium by which a society establishes its special identity" (44). We connect to Kambili's experiences through our own fluency with food. Though the frequent use of Igbo words will likely escape most of her Western readership,

Adichie uses the language of food to guide an understanding of the relationship between English and Igbo words and culture. In describing Eugene's enraged muddling of his native and learned tongues as "a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones," the author provides a visceral metaphor that situates the language of the colonizer as sharp and interrupting and that of the indigenous community as nourishing and wholesome (210).

Beatrice's oppression and liberation is also represented in the tea. As a docile and particularly traditional Igbo wife, Beatrice possesses no autonomy over her own condition or that of her children. Eugene uses his hands to physically abuse Beatrice causing her to suffer numerous miscarriages. He literally prevents her ability to mother the lost children. Eugene's hindrance of Beatrice's mothering extends to her living children—Kambili and Jaja. As a symbol of their affluence, the Achike family have hired domestic help in every practical function of the home including cooking. A young woman named Sisi prepares all of the family meals and although motherhood is not predicated on providing food, by order of Eugene, Beatrice does not even possess the opportunity to counter his love tea act by feeding her children from her own hands. Beatrice simply oversees Sisi's preparation of the family meal. The mother of the family is left out of the "love sip" and, thus, cannot even adjust the meal to accommodate her children's scalded tongues (8).

Beatrice is further removed from shielding her children from Eugene's oppressive actions when he uses the same "green kettle Sisi used to boil hot water for tea" to scald Kambili and Jaja's feet with boiling hot water as punishment for their embrace of traditional West African religion (194). The grieving mother is only allowed to soothe her children once Eugene has finished his abuse. Having witnessed the severe maltreatment of her children, Beatrice rushes into the bathroom. Unable to walk, Kambili is initially carried from the bathtub where her feet



are burned by Eugene until Beatrice begs, “Let me, please” (195). At this moment, Beatrice uses food to mother and aid Kambili’s healing,

I did realize that Mama had come into the bathroom. Tears were running down her face. Her nose was running, too, and I wondered if she would wipe it before it got to her mouth, before she would have to taste it. She mixed salt with cold water and gently plastered the gritty mixture onto my feet. (195)

This description of Beatrice’s mothering healing through food appeals to the senses. The reader can imagine the saltiness of Beatrice’s tears in the details of her homemade remedy to sooth her children’s pain. Adichie uses our familiarity with the taste of salt to draw us into a sensory connection with the character. The clear emotion aligned with her act indicates her intention to seek retribution for Eugene’s constant and cruel attacks on her children, both born and unborn.

Salt also alludes to irritation of the emotional wounds Beatrice suffers at Eugene’s hand. Eugene’s attack on the children vexes Beatrice beyond his abuse of her. As she salts her children’s feet through her salty tears, she is emboldened to retaliate against Eugene. Towards the end of the text, Eugene brutally beats Kambili with his feet for her growing admiration of West African spiritual and cultural traditions. The young girl is hospitalized and upon her release learns of her father’s death. At this point in the action, Beatrice confesses to have slowly ended Eugene’s life by putting “poison in his tea” (290). Underscoring the significance of Beatrice’s choice of weapon against Eugene, Kambili screams, “Why did you put it in his tea?” when she learns of her mother’s murderous scheme (290). This liquid food had been sacred to Eugene for its representation of a Western ideal; however, it ultimately severely wounds his children and kills him. The identity of the violence perpetrated onto African nations and the Diaspora at large is evident in this tea. Beatrice seeks the area she is

most resentful of being denied in order to exact her vengeance on Eugene. Her mothering through food possesses a distinctly negative existence. She defends her children by ridding them of the threat of their father through the use of food.

Ifeoma's identity and mothering resistance departs drastically from Beatrice's. The first descriptions of Ifeoma reference her charm. She is "tall, exuberant, fearless, loud, larger than life" (95). At once, she is a full and hearty character that juxtaposes the cold rigidity of the Achike home and family routine. Ifeoma is both tangible and ethereal. Her laughter floats throughout the Achike house excising the paralyzing silence that typically envelopes the home. Kambili describes her aunt as tall "with a well-proportioned body" and notes that "she walked fast, like one who knew just where she was going and what she was going to do there...she spoke the way she walked, as if to get as many words out of her mouth as she could in the shortest time" (71). In this description, Ifeoma is assertive and confident. Her personality is in stark opposition to Beatrice and Kambili's and challenges Eugene's despotic hold over the family. Her boldness mirrors Adichie's use of Nigerian food and culture in a text with such universal appeal.

Ifeoma represents a disparate dynamic of the postcolonial experience as we understand her experience through food. She is increasingly unable to provide substantive meals for her children; however, the widowed mother of three exhibits resolve in splurging on chicken and soft drinks to celebrate the arrival of her niece and nephew—Kambili and Jaja—for the summer. Despite being furloughed by the government-sponsored university for which she works, Ifeoma is most resilient when she eschews the reality of her unfortunate social and economic reality and feeds the five children (three her own and two her brother's) crammed in her small, university-

sponsored flat. The children are immediately tuned into their mother's act of resistance against political oppression as the result of the inaugural meal of Kambili and Jaja's visit.

Revealing the infrequency of balanced meals in her home, Ifeoma's eldest son exclaims, "I hope Kambili and Jaja come every day so we can eat like this. Chicken and soft drinks!...When was the last time we ate chicken?" (119, 120). It is not lack that typifies Ifeoma and her family, but the intentional presentation of goods that demonstrates the character's determined spirit. She scoffs at the food sent by her more affluent and decidedly Western brother and feeds the children with what she has—sacrificing to provide the treats of meat and soft drinks to welcome Kambili and Jaja. Ifeoma's sacrifice is reminiscent of my grandmother's. Despite her limited resources, she creates a way to provide for the children in her family.

The food that she serves represent what historian James McWilliams terms "cuisines of survival"—or the creation of dishes fashioned to provide place and belonging to a dispossessed people (Carney 177). The frequent abuse of Kambili and Jaja at the hands of their father render them relatively disinherited. Ifeoma's act of sacrifice in purchasing the unusual treat of chicken and sugary beverages demonstrates her deliberate aim to display love to her brother's abused progeny. With that meal, she inaugurates a progressive revolution in the two children.

In order to provide the luxurious meal to the children, Ifeoma counted chicken like my grandmother. Kambili notices that the plate of food in her aunt's home is markedly sparse compared to the plates of abundant food she is accustomed to receiving at home. As for the chicken on her plate, there is only "half of a drumstick"—alluding to Ifeoma's manipulation of the bird to ensure each child received a piece (119). Like my grandmother, Ifeoma places less emphasis on providing copious amounts of food and focuses on ensuring each child feels that the planning of the meal included a thought of them.

Being considered by her aunt in this way is alarming to Kambili. Although food is plentiful in their home, the meals are prepared and consumed without any acknowledgement of their needs and concerns. They are simply fixtures in their father's rigid existence—props in his Western performance. Whereas Beatrice is silent in her attempts to spare her children from the harm in their home, Ifeoma is bold in her mothering acts. Despite the scarcity of food in her home, Ifeoma provides an environment that begins to influence both Kambili and Jaja positively and separate them from their oppressive home life. Kambili cues in on the free-spirited banter that occurs between Ifeoma and her three children—Amaka, Obiora, and Chima—at the dinner table. Although Ifeoma is unable to provide an abundance of food for her children because the government has shut down the university where she works, she succeeds in intellectually and emotionally nourishing them. Amaka, Obiora, and Chima experience a freedom that Kambili and Jaja lack in their home that is linked distinctly to Ifeoma's concerted mothering efforts.

Kambili observes that during meals in Ifeoma's home, "you could say anything at any time to anyone...the air was free for you to breathe as you wished"—significantly contrasting the rigid and regimented mealtimes in the Achike home (120). Gloria Wade-Gayles discusses a similar dinner time dynamic from her childhood in "Laying On Hands' through Cooking: Black Women's Majesty and Mystery in Their Own Kitchens," where she recounts that,

family meals were...intellectual gatherings. I remember watching a television special on President John F. Kennedy which attributed his success to a family ritual of discussing ideas around the dining table and saying to myself that no one would believe a black family living in a segregated housing project in the South observed the same ritual. (100)

Wade-Gayles' detailing of this practice around food illuminates the intellectual profundity and potential of low income black families. In a similar fashion, Adichie's incorporation of this moment in the text advocates for an analogous reality for African families. The rituals of Ifeoma's family meal resist negative concepts about the African family unit and focuses the reader on the spiritual malnourishment of Kambili and Jaja at the hands of their father's representative imperialism. What Ifeoma's family lacks in sustenance, they overflow with in emotional support and comfort. Kambili notes that in Ifeoma's home, "food had little meat" however, "laughter always rang out...it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms" (140). The laughter in Ifeoma's home is mingled with Igbo praise songs at prayer time and although the food lacked adequate seasoning at times, "morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs" (140). This liberty nourishes Kambili and Jaja in a way that food does not and allows them to breach "the blanket of silence, embrace defiance, and initiate a cultural reclamation" of their Igbo roots—revelations that could not be made in their abundant yet oppressive home (Mabura 220). Ifeoma indeed feeds Kambili and Jaja in literal and figurative ways.

The traditional Nigerian food served in Ifeoma's home embraces the family's rich cultural roots in a way that the food in the Achike home does not. While both households serve similar Nigerian meals such as jollof rice, fried chicken, and fufu, how the meals are prepared differs significantly. As mentioned earlier, Sisi, the Achike's cook, prepares the family meals. There is no intimacy or joint effort in making mealtime happen. Since food is so abundant in the Achike home, the act of having meals does not represent survival in the way that it does in Ifeoma's small flat.

One of the most telling moments of the use of food to heal and represent resistance to oppression occurs when Ifeoma teaches Kambili how to properly peel cocoyams. This moment occurs just after Kambili witnesses her cousin Amaka's intimate interaction with their grandfather Papa-Nnukwu. Eugene has disowned Papa-Nnukwu (his father) for his representation of what Eugene considers to be pagan practices. Alternately, Ifeoma brings her father from his village into her small flat to attend to his challenging health issues. Ifeoma's deliberate care for her father leads to her children's possession of a deeply intimate bond with their aging grandfather. While watching Amaka paint a portrait of Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili sees the depth of the relationship between her cousin and her grandfather and longs for such a connection for herself,

They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have. I wanted to get up and leave, but my legs did not belong to me, did not do what I wanted them to. Finally, I pushed myself up and went into the kitchen; neither Papa-Nnukwu nor Amaka noticed when I left. (165)

Kambili's emotional observation represents more than her distance from her paternal grandfather. Kambili relates the disconnect she possesses to her own cultural history. Ifeoma uses traditional foodways to soothe the intense trauma Kambili feels.

When Kambili arrives in the kitchen after leaving Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu, she watches her aunt "pulling brown skin off hot cocoyams" (165). Ifeoma immediately notices the tears in Kambili's eyes. She realizes that her niece's tears are in some way tied to her feeling of disconnect and instructs her to help her peel the cocoyams. Ifeoma's immediate response to Kambili's detachment is to draw the young girl back in by including her in the preparation of the family meal with an ingredient distinct to Nigerian cuisine. Kambili attempts to model her

aunt's behavior and help with the task; however, Kambili has never been required to work in the kitchen in her own home and when she tries to peel the vegetable, "the rough brown skin stayed put" and the hot steam burned her hands (165). Noticing her difficulty peeling the yams, Ifeoma instructs her, "soak your hand in water first" and demonstrates the proper peeling method to guide Kambili (165). Assisting her aunt with completing the peeling and watching her pound the yams into a thick paste creates a deeper bond between Ifeoma and Kambili and assuages the young girl's sadness at feeling like an outsider to her own family and culture. By inviting Kambili to help prepare the meal, Ifeoma uses foodways to mother the young girl back into her immediate, extended, and cultural lineage.

Kambili and Jaja are enslaved by their abusive father and his demands that their household subscribe to strict Western cultural practices. Ifeoma acts as a surrogate parent to her niece and nephew and assists them in resisting Eugene's oppressive influence. Her efforts to dismantle Eugene's tyranny employs the use of maternal tenderness and food. Her actions are not unlike the practices of enslaved Africans who harnessed the power of food to thrust their cultural identities out of the shadow of Western dominance.

Ifeoma demonstrates the memory and strength that can be conjured up with the preparation of foods that speak to cultural heritage. Her work with food to literally save her niece and nephew's lives is reminiscent of African women and their descendants who created fusion cuisines and memory dishes that attest[ed] to the African presence in the Americas" and asserted their resistance (Carney 177). Thus, "African ingredients and cooking practices gave the foodways of former plantation societies their distinctive culinary signatures" (177). As African food items and practices left an indelible mark on plantation culture in America and the

ultimate identity of food from the American South, Ifeoma uses food prep and mealtime practices to profoundly impact Kambili and Jaja.

In addition to feeding Kambili, Jaja, and her own children, Ifeoma also opens her home to the parish priest Father Amadi. Despite the increasing lack of food in her home, Ifeoma demonstrates a generosity that models a sentiment shared by Sarah Rice in her autobiography *He Included Me* that situates food as a “the vehicle with which black women ‘made a way out of no way,’ always providing some type of sustenance for their families and sometimes for their neighbors and friends as well” (Williams-Forson 85). In her text, Rice adds that food sharing by black women exhibited sacrifice on their part. While sharing food in the midst of communities with extreme lack demonstrated selflessness on the part of these women, at times, this act took its toll on the women and their families (Rice 36). Nevertheless, food sharing throughout their communities positioned black women as assets who were efficient food managers and communal caregivers—projecting esteem onto their challenging plight.

Father Amadi’s welcomed presence at Ifeoma’s dinner table paints her in a similar light to these community women. The priest’s unorthodox mingling of Igbo culture with elements of Western religious practice contributes immensely to the growth and identity reclamation that Kambili and Jaja experience in Nsukka. In contrast to Father Benedict (the Achike’s parish priest), Father Amadi forges a familial relationship with Ifeoma and her children that is emphasized by his joining the family several times for meals. Kambili identifies Father Amadi as a priest who had visited her own parish some time back and “who had broken into song in the middle of his sermon, whom Papa had said we had to pray for because people like him were trouble for the church” (136). The young cleric’s embrace of the same Igbo songs correlates with Adichie’s insistence on incorporating Nigerian food culture in her narrative. Father



Amadi's praise songs ring out throughout Ifeoma's home day and night placing him in further opposition to Father Benedict and Eugene's eschewal of traditional Nigerian culture. Astounded by the genuine compassion that Father Amadi expresses in his sharing of meals with her aunt's family, Kambili meticulously observes the priests' mannerisms as he chews—"He nodded as he chewed his yam and greens, and he did not speak until he had swallowed a mouthful and sipped some water"—and his individual kinship with each member of the household (135).

In the midst of mealtime with Ifeoma's family, Father Amadi discusses a bevy of contemporary topics that transcend the religious dialogue between Eugene and Father Benedict. These conversations do not occur during church services or any other interaction with the priest. Mealtime possesses a distinct opportunity to further bond him with the family. Ifeoma creates this dynamic by welcoming Father Amadi to her home for food. Kambili marvels at the priest's ability and willingness to talk "about football to Obiora, the journalist the government had just arrested with Amaka, the Catholic women's organization with Auntie Ifeoma and the neighborhood video game with Chima" over the family meal (135). Father Amadi's Nigerian identity stakes him in the affairs surrounding the community he serves. His intrinsic comprehension of the struggles and beliefs that exist in his country afford him the will to assist Ifeoma with caring for her ailing father and feeding her family. Lily Mabura notes that although Ifeoma and Father Amadi "are not as materially successful as Eugene Achike, they are visibly influential in their defiance of prevailing negative perceptions of Igbo language and culture and are critical of government autocracy and failures" (215). Where the bounty of the Achike household has failed to sustain Kambili and Jaja, Father Amadi and Auntie Ifeoma emotionally and culturally nourish the youth. In the case of Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice, hunger surpasses edible sustenance. Adichie depicts two different realities where Kambili and Jaja enjoy hearty

portions but lack emotional health and Amaka, Obiora, and Chima are satisfied and healthy despite the smaller servings and meat-deprived diets forced upon them by the current economic climate of Nsukka.

Ifeoma's mothering through food extends beyond her biological children to her brother's children, the parish priest, her female university students, and even her own father. All of her efforts to literally and figuratively feed her community encompass her activist spirit. Her food sharing and nourishing knowledge are sacrificial. She aids in enriching the larger community; however, her financial stability and ability to provide for herself and her family are increasingly diminished. This reality of Ifeoma's experience syncs with Papa-Nnukwu's telling of a story from the oral tradition. Implored by his grandchildren to tell a story, the elderly man begins "the story of why the tortoise has a cracked shell" (157). The telling of this story within the narrative serves many purposes. It roots the family and their Igbo culture in ancestral richness. It demonstrates Papa-Nnukwu's charisma despite his failing health and momentarily reestablishes him as the patriarch of the family—a role Eugene has assumed due to the entitlement he feels as the most monetarily successful. Lastly, this story says something about mothering and food.

Papa-Nnukwu's tale is about a time "long ago, when animals talked and lizards were few" and "there was a big famine in the land of the animals" (157). The food disparity in the fictional tale symbolically models the increasing lack experienced by Ifeoma and her family in the university compound in Nsukka. As the animals of Papa-Nnukwu's story explore new ways of feeding themselves amid the famine, they decide to "kill their mothers and eat them" (158). While many of the animals disagree with this decision because they remember "the sweetness of their mothers' breast milk," the community moves forward with this solution (158). It is remarkable to note that what deters the animals who are not initially convinced of this odd

resolution is the thought of the ways their mothers have sacrificially nourished them (with breastmilk) in the past. Regardless of where they stand on the issue of how to withstand the famine, mothering and food is involved. Quieting the protests and giggles of his grandchildren at the animals' choice to eat their mothers, Papa-Nnukwu notes, "the mothers did not mind being sacrificed" (158). It is here where this fictional oral tale elucidates the critical dynamic of sacrifice at the center of Ifeoma's mothering practice and within the larger concept of black mothering across the Diaspora. The mothers do not resist being sacrificial in their critical role. What is painfully problematic about the tale is the persistence of the forced sacrifice of black female bodies for the greater good. While this is a fictional instance of mothering sacrifice, it departs from the assertions of my argument because the animal mothers possess no agency and have no choice but to be eaten. They cannot and do not resist.

Adichie's own childhood experience with food coincides with the misfortunes of the children and families in her text. The author shares that although she considers her childhood to have been very happy and laughter-filled, she "grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education" and, as the result, there were times when the university could not pay her parents' salaries (*The Danger of a Single Story*). At times when government unrest challenged her family's financial stability, food was limited in her home and she "saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed" (*The Danger of a Single Story*). In sharing this about her own history, Adichie links oppression and food disparity. Her work in *Purple Hibiscus* expands this connection with Ifeoma's resistance to varying forms of oppression with the use of food and meal times.

In *Ifeoma*, Adichie creates a character that disavows the stereotypical roles and assignments of women by patriarchy. Much like the thoughts shared by Adichie in her many non-fictional texts promoting feminist ideas, *Ifeoma* does not believe that marriage is the ultimate goal for women and she does not limit the capability of motherhood to advocate for female autonomy. Notably, the character possesses the same name as Adichie's mother Grace Ifeoma Adichie who served as the first female registrar at the University of Nigeria. The naming of this character is significant in her representation of resistance to patriarchal norms and championing of feminist activism. In an intimate conversation in the text, *Ifeoma* advises Beatrice that "sometimes life begins when marriage ends" and expresses repulsion at the girls from her classes who decide to marry before they complete their education stating, "the husbands own them and their degrees" (75). *Ifeoma*'s characterization and actions within the text disavow conventional roles created for women while embracing motherhood as a seemingly conventional role that possesses the potential to positively transform entire communities. *Ifeoma*'s negotiation of mothering is further sophisticated by her use of food, cooking, and meal times to underscore her activism.

Over the course of this study, we have witnessed revolutionary action on the part of black women manifesting in the most common places—all spaces associated with motherhood. Nina Simone's "Four Women" has served as a focal point for this discussion in each chapter. Simone's lyrics expand the tradition of black female resistance by embedding deliberate and taboo messaging about the will and determination of black women in her music. Similarly, Adichie's work builds on a transnational history of black women across the Diaspora who produce narratives that embody their ideology on black female agency. The third persona in "Four Women" is Sweet Thing. Her name immediately conjures a sensory response associated

with food. The specifics of her identity are muted; she is just a thing. Yet, we are to know that she appeals to sensual pleasure. She is sweet. And like wine, she is intoxicating.

*My skin is tan*

*My hair is fine*

*My hips invite you*

*My mouth like wine*

*Whose little girl am I?*

*Anyone who has money to buy*

*What do they call me*

*My name is Sweet Thing*

*My name is Sweet Thing*

Like the other women, we are told about Sweet Thing's looks. Her skin is tan and her hair is fine. In taking time to enumerate the variety of skin tones and hair textures in the four characters of "Four Women," Simone underscores the multiplicity of black women despite society's grouping of the demography into one homogeneous lump of sameness. What is most remarkable about Sweet Thing is her defiance and unabashed protest of expectations of respectability for women—especially black women. Sweet Thing is a sex worker and is very clear about how her trade operates. Her sensuality nourishes the sexual desires of the men she engages through her work. The sacrifice of her body in order to provide for herself is a deliberate manipulation of a system designed to oppress her and others like her.

Sweet Thing refuses to yield a true name in association with the business she is conducting. The men who pay her will not know her name. They will not know her. I do not

assert that Sweet Thing is attempting to dismantle oppressive patriarchy by playing into it or wresting what Adichie would call “bottom power” (*We Should All Be Feminists* 44). According to Adichie, “a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men” does not possess any power in that role (44). In Adichie’s estimation, bottom power “is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person’s power” (45). But Sweet Thing seems to enact a play for power that moves beyond controlling men and siphoning their patriarchal power. Like Ifeoma, her power lies in how she engages life. Across the various schools of feminist thought in Africa, there is an association with the progressive woman and sexually liberated women. In part, this association is a ploy by patriarchy to discredit and discourage women from maneuvering outside of socially accepted norms and roles. They put forth that if women move beyond the roles of traditional wife and mother, they must be using sex to sustain their lives.

The other end of this association comes from contemporary practices like that of some recent female university graduates in Nigeria who prefer to retain a certain amount of social freedom by choosing to have relationships and children with married men so that they do not have to play the traditional role of the wife. Nigerian womanist theorist Chikwenye Ogunyemi argues that these young women prefer these polygynous arrangements, so “that they do not get oppressed in marriage” in the ways their mothers and grandmothers might have been (Arndt 716). Ogunyemi credits the work of African women writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Nawal El Saadawi with elucidating the perils of African womanhood to the new generation and guiding their thinking toward the possibilities of power that can be gained through sex. So, Sweet Thing’s power and protest is unlike Ifeoma’s in that both women detach themselves from the identity of needing a male benefactor to establish their

worth or maintain their lives. They are both very clear on the fact that they are assets to society in one way or the other and refuse to relinquish their lives to relationships that might diminish their personal autonomy.

Ifeoma of *Purple Hibiscus* is not a sex worker. However, her career as a female college professor with radical political convictions is just as controversial. The political climate of Nsukka, Nigeria in the text and repressive patriarchal ideas about women and education held by most in the society relegate the character to social ostracism similar to what is referenced in Sweet Thing's verse. The rhetorical inquiry "Who's little girl am I?" being followed by "Anyone with money to buy" ties Sweet Thing to Ifeoma's vehement detestation of being controlled by patriarchal power which manifests through money and government in the text. Ifeoma frequently rejects her brother Eugene's monetary assistance and his constant attempts to dictate how she should believe spiritually and behave socially. Like the Nigerian food throughout *Purple Hibiscus*, we benefit from seeing Sweet Thing as more than sumptuous pleasure and Ifeoma as palatable beyond the constraints of traditional roles for African women.

Both Sweet Thing and Ifeoma speak unapologetically and loudly against the powers that seek to control the whole of their existences and identities. Their characterization is as bold as the Nigerian food that draws the reader into African realities and out of the comfort of Western centrism. All of these entities unsettle the status quo. As Sweet Thing and Ifeoma undertake bold actions to subvert the authority given to men by sacrificially inserting their femaleness, Adichie skillfully and seamlessly incorporates an unequivocally Nigerian food presence that dismantles the notions that consider African cuisines as unrefined and culturally nebulous or fail to consider them at all.

Ifeoma, like Sweet Thing and the other female personas in Simone's song, represents an amalgam of the traditional roles assigned to black women by dominant culture. Yet, through the sacrificial and resourceful negotiation of her mothering responsibilities through food, she redefines the role and fortifies her family and community. Forming foodways as a resistant response to social oppression ultimately transforms her family and others in the text. Both Adichie and her fictional character embody a bit of the defiance Simone exhibited at the height of the civil rights movement and the dawn of the postcolonial era with "Four Women." Simone and Adichie resist being pigeonholed as black female artists and having their communities stymied by reductive stereotyping just as Sweet Thing and Ifeoma reject limiting characterization of their identities. Each woman takes significant risks to be vocal about the mistreatment of black female identities and bodies in the worlds they inhabit. Further, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie transforms the way Nigerian food and hunger should be considered and discussed in the global market and carves a place for the themes of motherhood and food to be defined from an Afrocentric lens.



**CHAPTER 5: MAMA BUCHI: *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD* AND BUCHI  
EMECHETA'S MODEL FOR TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING RESISTANCE**

*My skin is black*

*My arms are long*

*My hair is woolly*

*My back is strong*

*Strong enough to take the pain*

*Inflicted again and again*

*What do they call me*

*My name is Aunt Sarah*

*My name is Aunt Sarah*

The opening lines of “Four Women” presents a familiar archetype of the black woman. At first glance, Aunt Sarah is the quintessential black female figure whose usefulness is bound to servitude. She is asexual and unattractive by Western beauty standards. Simone uses recognizable rhetoric to link Aunt Sarah to a long history of abuse and oppression perpetrated onto the black woman and her body. The moniker of Aunt connotes the social expectation placed upon her to support her own community and others. Elderly black women were often referred to as “aunt” or “auntie” during and after slavery by white people who saw them only for their domestic utility. Mid to late twentieth century consumerism marketed the black auntie character to sell pancakes and syrup. She is equivalent to mammy. Her back is strong as she is relegated to figuratively carrying the burdens of her identity and the world beyond.

Employing irony, Simone reductively-describes Aunt Sarah and laces the verse with underappreciation for her strength as useful for labor and service. Though the song could be misconstrued as a montage of the reductive representations of black women across history, Simone provides clear moments of resolve and resistance. These instances are even more covert when reading the song's lyrics as opposed to seeing Simone (and other artists after her) perform the work live. We cannot overlook the fact that despite being reduced to an "auntie," Aunt Sarah is strong and able to withstand abuse "inflicted again and again" (Simone). Her black skin is not the marker of inferiority as was the case in the social and civil realities of the mid-sixties. Simone flips the stereotypical, mammy-esque figure in the eyes and ears of the American public into one that outright resists the limited considerations of black womanhood prevalent in her society.

Both Simone and Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta produced work within their fields that challenged the limited consideration of Black women's identities. Aunt Sarah appropriately comes first in Simone's text. Her surface similarity to the mammy character allows for a progression in the ways black women's identities have been limited. Just as the mammy character serves as one of the oldest stereotypes of black womanhood, Aunt Sarah inaugurates our thinking on these tropes as the song begins and exhibits the universal plight of Africana women and is significant to a discussion of Emecheta's magnum opus *The Joys of Motherhood* and its usefulness in unpacking the complexity of the Diasporic black female struggle against marginality. This chapter on Emecheta is last to demonstrate this unpacking from its most recent representations to the foundation. A discussion of Africana mothering as a site of resistance must engage Emecheta as a foundational figure. Emecheta's success within the literary canon

and transnational intentionality position her as an ideal point of reference for discussing black motherhood as a means to challenge limited, stereotypical considerations of black women.

This chapter engages Emecheta's life and work and focuses specifically on her 1979 text *The Joys of Motherhood* which includes the three major themes of mothering in the larger study—*mothering the community*, *mothering babies*, and *mothering the stomach*. The three thematic areas of focus of this study—1) *mothering the community*, 2) *mothering babies*, 3) *mothering the stomach*—point to moments in *The Joys of Motherhood* where the women of the action negotiate their prescribed female roles in ways that circumvent male control and refashion mothering to empower their existence and the children within their reach. The three events of the text associated to each theme illustrate Nnu Ego's survival as a mother in a system designed to abuse and disregard the mothering experience.

While previous chapters connect one author and work with just one of the three themes, Emecheta's text serves as an example of a work that boldly demonstrates all three. This more exhaustive examination of Emecheta presents the author as a central figure to the idea of transnational mothering as outright resistance. Of the other authors in this study, she is most like Simone's Aunt Sarah, whose verse encompasses aspects of each of the other women's struggle. She is the mother figure for this mother study.

Emecheta's intentional focus on motherhood and her transnational identity as a Nigerian transplant living most of her life in England expands the reach of her work. Through her writing, Emecheta breaks with ideas of contemporary African womanist theorists like fellow Nigerian Chikwenye Ogunyemi who assert that African women's distinctive realities depart from those of African American women so much that a collective response to the plight of all black women lacks practicality and equitable representation for African women. Ogunyemi sees a specific

need to “conceptualize an ideology that clearly demarcates and emancipates African womanism from both white feminism and African-American womanism/feminism” holding that both schools of feminist thought “overlook African peculiarities” (Ardnt 711, Ogunyemi 114). On the other hand, white feminist theorist Kirsten Holst Petersen focuses her work on African women and writing and asserts that African women undoubtedly experience a disparate lot of oppression when compared to Western women; however, there is room for a collective formation of women in the realm of feminism. Petersen goes on to argue that African women, especially those who are living and writing after independence from colonial regimes, are charged with assuming predominately subservient roles in order to aid in the revival of their post colony’s representation across the globe. Emecheta’s writing and reality represent a kinship among black women across the globe especially as it relates to facing the challenges of motherhood in patriarchal societies without trivializing the nuances of her unique identity and that of other mothers.

During the mid-twentieth century, in order for countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, and more to be viewed as civilized and dignified after the upheaval of imperialism, its women would need to embody specific traits to support the narrative. This pressure was not only placed on African women during the mid-twentieth century, but it has persisted into the twenty-first century. The requirement of African women to serve as foil characters in the tales of their civilizations’ honor resulted in their being projected as docile, subservient, and most useful in roles that supported patriarchy much like the depiction of the good African sister or woman in Mnthali’s poem. Petersen describes this occurrence as limiting the African woman to being “conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence”—a role that served the continent, but not the woman (38). This greatly affected the portrayal of women in African literature.

Emecheta rose to literary notoriety a decade and a half after Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain. During the time when she was publishing her most famous works, Emecheta's native country was struggling to recover from a number of political coups as well as the bloody and devastating Biafran War. Unlike Chimamanda Adichie, Emecheta published much of her work during a time when the Nigeria had only recently begun to craft a national narrative with the intent to combat the effects of colonialism and imperialism. In order to build the nation, Nigeria needed to appear civilized to the Western world. Thus, many of the narratives coming out of the nation during the mid-twentieth depicted the dignified history of the country with women in supporting roles. At this time in the country's history, the unstable government was run by men and the globally recognized literature coming from the country was that of male authors like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. There are a number of other prolific male authors hailing from Nigeria during this time; however, Emecheta almost stands alone with the exception of her contemporary Flora Nwapa<sup>15</sup>. Unlike their male contemporaries, both Emecheta and Nwapa produced works that privileged the female perspective.

Much like Nwapa, despite focusing her work on the realities and experiences of African women, Emecheta never professed to be a feminist. However, critics of her work describe the author as quintessentially feminist—placing her in a category that was virtually untapped by Nigerian writers, male or female, during the initial years of her publishing. While Emecheta claimed to simply be “telling stories...using the voices of women,” those who have studied her work see a more deliberate intent (*Last Word*). Stéphane Robolin categorizes *The Joys of*

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<sup>15</sup> Nigerian writer Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa is often referred to as the mother of modern African literature. With the publication of her 1966 novel *Efuru*, she became the first African woman to publish an English language novel in Great Britain. Much of her work focused on Igbo traditions through the lens of an Igbo woman.

*Motherhood* as an “explicitly feminist novel” that is “engaged in a (fictionalized) theoretical enterprise in its own right” and avows that any discussion of the text must put it in conversation with cultural and literary theory (Robolin 77). Zahra Barfi and Sarieh Alaei avow that “*The Joys of Motherhood*, criticizes the native patriarchy for oppressing, dismissing and dominating the disempowered female characters”—situating the text as a credo for feminist agency against the oppressive system present in the traditions of Igbo culture (14). Anu Baisel goes further in describing Emecheta as “fiercely feminist” and sets the writer apart by claiming that

as a woman, a mother, and a sociologist, [Emecheta] advances insightful perspectives on social and political realities, their origin and change that are different from those of most male African writers who write in English and of the literary and cultural critics who ignore her and the subjectivity as well as historicity of most women in Africa. (Baisel 1)

Both critics hold that Emecheta’s work, specifically *The Joys of Motherhood*, challenges the mission of postcolonial Nigeria to venerate itself in the eyes of the West at the expense of its women. The intersection of Emecheta’s western location, identity, and experiences uniquely positioned the author to elucidate the world on the realities of women from her culture. As an expatriate residing in England she broke from the dignifying mission of her postcolonial home. She was also able to demonstrate how the atrocities perpetrated on women within her culture had deeper global implications.

Although labeling the author as “fiercely feminist,” Baisel cues in on what separates Emecheta even from Nwapa. To assign a general label of feminist to Emecheta limits her work and reach. Any analysis of Emecheta must consider her knowledge and achievement in the discipline of sociology. Baisel acknowledges this distinct element of Emecheta’s identity in noting that *The Joys of Motherhood* moves beyond a narrative that simply depicts the life

experiences of Igbo women in colonial Nigeria, but the text “becomes an elaborate exploration of what went wrong with Nnu Ego” (Baisel 2). As Petersen notes, “there seems to be a general consensus among sociologists that the position of women deteriorated during the colonial period” and that this decline of autonomy for African women was primary due to the “large-scale movement from rural areas into the extended slums of the new colonial centres like Nairobi and Lagos” (39). Teresa Derrickson acknowledges that the typically analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* generally ignore Emecheta’s indictment of colonialism alongside traditional Ibo culture in terms of how both repress women. Derrickson asserts that in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta “bears out the fact that this transitional period was particularly disadvantageous for African women” and that African women like the novel’s main character Nnu Ego were forced to “walk a fine line between that which was demanded of them by their village communities and that which was demanded of them by the rules of a European political regime (Derrickson).

Emecheta provides an accurate depiction of this exact dynamic in her characterization of Nnu Ego and the narration of her experiences. The author is not only telling a story, her work aligns expertly with the sociological realities of the time and space about which she is writing. Salome Nnoromele avows that *The Joys of Motherhood* “offers a sustained exploration of the African woman’s experience”—a theme that Nnoromele feels is consistently lacking African literature from all generations (178). Noting that “infant mortality was an ever-present reality of life for Nigerian women in the 1930s, the time in which Emecheta sets her novel,” Baisel contextualizes Emecheta’s inclusion of several instances where women lose their infant children as more than just storytelling, but deeply analytical (Baisel 1). Emecheta crafts a complex sociological study in her creation of Nnu Ego that rings with statistical truth. This undergirds her novel with more than anecdotal scenarios and separates her from her literary predecessors and contemporaries.

Emecheta demonstrates atrocities projected onto Nigerian women in *The Joys of Motherhood* that marries her personal experiences and what became known as statistical fact about the era in which the novel was set. Thus, it is most useful to consider how *The Joys of Motherhood* and Emecheta's other texts exist as sociological analyses which complicate the dominant narrative of Nigerian culture and history and challenge the hegemonic sociological and anthropological narratives put forth by European colonists.

Through her candid narration, Emecheta creates a text that privileges the female voice, but is not limited to influencing only the issues of women. Her skillful work communicates as much about the complexities of African women as it does about that of her country and the African continent at large. In an era when much of the most popular African literature possessed predominate images of the nation's women as compliant within the traditionally accepted standards of the culture to demonstrate the deep ties with civilization, Emecheta paints a more equitable picture with narratives told through the perspectives of women. Her telling further challenges the notion that submissive, compliant women equal a sophisticated culture by highlighting her own experiences as a Nigerian woman who singlehandedly raises five children abroad in England while gaining advanced degrees in sociology. Nothing of Emecheta's writing or identity fits the mold of tradition.

Emecheta's life in England did not limit her ability to narrate realities of Nigeria and Africa. To the contrary, Emecheta maintained a strong Nigerian identity while acknowledging the nuances of her life in the Western world in the way she lived and wrote. Her oldest son, Sylvester Onwordi, Jr. acknowledged that his mother felt that had she stayed in Nigeria, she would have had to stay in her abusive marriage, so Emecheta realized that living in England was significant to the resistance she waged through her writing and mothering practice. In her



autobiography *Head Above Water* the author details the intense effort she exhibited in keeping elements of her native culture integral in her home. She prepared traditional Nigerian dishes for her family. Thus, they “never acquired the art of eating bacon and eggs for breakfast” (a Western custom) (*Head Above Water* 60). Emecheta kept Africa near herself and her family at the same table where Sylvester, Jr. remembers her writing for long hours while her children played. She was keenly aware that her homeland was simultaneously integral to her success as well as her struggles. So, she kept it close, like her children, and embedded it into her work—doing what she described as putting down “the whole truth, my own truths as I saw them” (58).

Emecheta pinpointed the limitations placed on her and other black women as the result of their diasporic identities especially within representation in literature. Nana Ayebia Clarke, her agent at Heinemann, recalls Emecheta’s frustration with the misrepresentation of black female characters and, by proxy, black women in literature. The writer was clear that her African identity had the potential to connect her to other black women and their experiences as opposed to separating her from them. According to Clarke, the author felt “all black women should unite to challenge the way they are portrayed in world literature” (*Last Word*). Emecheta viewed the plight of black women as a global issue.

Emecheta not only considered writing her story and the stories of other black women as a means to defend black female identities; she deemed it as a way to reclaim histories that dominant culture disregarded. When she began writing, she struggled with an adequate process for her work. Initially, she tried to write down everything she wanted to say and had a woman she knew type up her manuscripts only to be disappointed with the outcome because the woman could not read her handwriting and did not grasp her content enough to fill in the vast gaps. Emecheta realized that she would need to do her own writing as well as her own typing. She

recognized that she would need to take ownership of the entire process if it was going to do her work and her subject—the black woman—justice.

Learning to type proved to be more than a clerical challenge; it was cultural. She surmised that part of the reason there were so many misrepresentations of African women, people, customs, and the like was because the Western world lacked the tools to access the oral tradition and, thus, many of the stories of her people and others across the continent went unheard and erased. She theorized that,

Big mother in Ibusa did not use a typewriter since her stories were simply for us, the children in her compound. And that was one of the big misconceptions about Mother Africa: because she did not write down her stories and her experiences, people of the West are bold enough to say that she has no history. I must not fall into the same trap. I must not allow myself to. (*Head Above Water* 59-60)

By embracing the writing techniques of the Western world and choosing to produce her work in her fourth language (English), Emecheta boldly embodied the role of mother storyteller for the experiences of black women globally.

Like “Big mother in Ibusa,” she wrote stories intended for her children and others who might view her a maternal literary guide (59). Clarke held that Emecheta’s stories “debunked that myth” that black women were all or mostly “impoverished, helpless victims who lacked agency” (*Last Word*). A modest Emecheta maintained that she was simply telling stories and not working toward any larger goal with her writing. The writer claimed “apart from telling stories, I don’t have a particular mission. I just like to tell the world our part of the story while using the voices of women” (*Last Word*). While this seems to rid her of any culpability in her work going beyond the scope of mere stories, her own admission that she wanted those stories to reach the world

connotes a desire to debunk, enlighten, and expose a global audience to the realities of life for black women regardless of cultural context.

In examining Emecheta, the intricacies of her transnational identity must be acknowledged. The details of her move and existence in London contributed significantly to her work. Her struggle as an abused wife and subsequent single mother of five crept into much of her writing in a manner that not only testified to her hardship but provided a glance into the universal suffering women like her were experiencing around the Diaspora. Although much of Emecheta's work possesses a distinctly Nigerian cultural focus, her writing clearly links her experiences as an expatriate in a Western country to that of black women across the globe. Thus, Emecheta is both African and Western. Clarke remarked that the writer, "mined her own life's experiences as a way of commenting on the plight of black women and their place in society" (*Last Word*). Here again, Emecheta employs a sociological lens to her writing that allows for a broad depiction of very intimate realities.

Considering the challenges of her native culture's attitudes towards women as well as the more global denial of rights for women, a task of this nature and magnitude (protecting and advocating for black women) almost guaranteed Emecheta would receive harsh opposition and criticism. She was a single black mother who wanted to write about other black mothers. She even expressed her own reservations at the lack of interest most might have in the perils of black womanhood and motherhood when she first put down ideas that would become her first novel *Second Class Citizen*. While contemplating how she would write what she desired to write she questioned, "Who will be interested in reading the life of an unfortunate black woman who seemed to be making a mess of her life?" (*Head Above Water* 58). The title of the text and Emecheta's reservations about her subject matter lend again to an analysis of her writing as

sociological. The author seemed concerned that her potential readership would not see passed the surface of the story to gain a better understanding of how experiences of black women could serve to inform about the state of affairs across the Diaspora.

Her fiercest opposition existed in her own home. Emecheta's husband burned her first completed manuscript, *The Bride Price*. He had been furious that she had dared to defy cultural and social expectations for women of her race, class, and upbringing. For Sylvester Onwordi, Sr., it was completely acceptable for Emecheta to be a wife and mother within his limited consideration of the roles, but her attempt to write that experience in a way that resisted the strictures of those social roles was intolerable. Emecheta perhaps anticipated some such response for she wrote the manuscript privately while caring for her children. *The Bride Price* possesses a far more positive tone and sentiment than the books Emecheta wrote after its destruction. This perhaps demonstrates how Onwordi's abusive actions towards Emecheta and her first written work affected her future writing.

The writer describes her emotional response to watching her work being destroyed by the father of her children as "agony...in my heart" (62). She admitted to the telling nature of that moment in the sure failure of her marriage. Her texts following *The Bride Price*, while all composed of stories distinct to her Nigerian identity, began to take on a more autobiographical tone. They were deliberately candid in relating the struggles of her existence as an abused wife and single African mother raising her children in the Western world.

Emecheta described the first draft of *The Bride Price*—the copy burned and destroyed by her husband—as a "romantic happily-ever-after story" that did not reveal much at all about her own experiences or reality (58). Her studies as a sociology student at a nearby university and the pressure of her own suffering led her to do what she described as writing about her own "social

reality” in future projects (58). She feared the reception she might receive from such an effort because, as she put it, the truth about her own life was “too horrible” (58). She was afraid that no one would believe her story, so in her first attempt at writing after leaving her husband, Emecheta wrote her own story under the cloak of fiction.

Significant to this study, Emecheta chose to tell her own story in *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* through a character named Adah—a name meaning “daughter.” Divulging the intimate truth of her experiences through a character whose name connotes the relationship between a parent and female child allows the stories Emecheta shares to speak to generations of women. The author later lamented the decision to put a fictitious name on her reality theorizing that,

using the fictitious name Adah instead of Buchi gave the book a kind of distance, and the distance gave the book the impression of being written by an observer. I was writing about myself as if I was outside me, looking at my friends and fellow sufferers as if I was not one of them. (58)

She felt as if she betrayed her truth in naming the heroine something other than her own name; however, by simply naming the character “daughter,” Emecheta extends her reach beyond her own microcosmic experience into a cosmology of women with traversing intersections. She does what African female theorists and womanists after her argue cannot be done. She creates a story that acknowledges women’s truths regardless of their placement in the Diaspora.

Emecheta embeds power in the role of the black mother with the creation of Adah. Although Adah shares similar realities to Emecheta—both women are Nigerian mothers in abusive marriages raising their children in Europe while aspiring to become writers—there is a creative element to Adah that allows her to transcend simply existing as the embodiment of Emecheta’s

life story. Like Aunt Sarah, Adah is distinctive yet universal. She represents one woman and many women.

Adah's husband, like Emecheta's, destroys her first complete manuscript out of chauvinist fear. What is more significant than the destruction of the book is the manner in which it is written. Adah works on her first novel while her oldest child is in nursery school and her younger children are taking naps. She navigates the uncharted terrain of writing in the midst of motherhood. Mothering is at the center of the text as the sole impetus and catalyst of her work.

Emecheta's boldness in centering motherhood in the midst of her creative and professional identities has inspired women writers across the Diaspora. African American writer Alice Walker confessed that she could not imagine penning a dedication like the one in Emecheta's second novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Addressing her five children, Emecheta writes,

To my dear children,  
Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy, and Alice,  
Without whose sweet background noises

This book would not have been written. (*Second Class Citizen* 6)

Walker, a mother and a writer herself, initially questioned the sincerity of the Nigerian author's sentiments quipping, "what kind of woman would think the 'background noises' of five children sweet?" (*Walker* 67). Upon reading the dedication, she assumed that Emecheta must have been attempting to assuage "unadmitted maternal guilt," but later came to realize that Emecheta existed as "a writer and a mother, and it is because she is both that she writes at all" (67).

Walker notes, "since this novel is written to the adults her children will become, it is okay with her if the distractions and joys they represent in her life," so "she writes her novel in bits and pieces while her children are still asleep or not so quietly playing" (69). Mothering provides the

opportunity and ingenuity for both women—Adah and Emecheta—to overcome their oppressive existences. To the casual observer, as Walker had initially been, it would seem that both women were tolerating motherhood with their sights set on the ostensibly higher calling of writing. However, the lens of this study perceives their actions as a reclamation of black motherhood, despite imposed social limitations, as social power.

Walker's revelation engages Emecheta's formation of a mothering practice that moved beyond care of her children into outright resistance against what oppressed and disenfranchised her and other women with similar intersections. Of the perhaps questionable dedication, Emecheta provides clarity to critics like Walker by contextualizing her statement about the useful role her children played in her writing, stating that those critics "forget many things" when they assume that the noises of children cannot support meaningful work (*Head Above Water* 60). In Emecheta's estimation, "they forget that when I was that age, I did not have a place I could call home" (60). The author is referring to her having raised her five children as a single mother in a city far from her native Lagos. Having moved to London with her husband at the age of 18 with two small children in tow, Emecheta led a self-determined existence of which her children were the center. The presence of her children literally provided her place in a world that literally and figuratively displaces black women daily. Her challenge of critics like Walker brings into focus the distinct class and cultural nuances of her experience. While African American women like Walker abide in an identity that has roots in physical displacement, Emecheta presents the complicated reality of having been displaced within her own culture not only because of her physical distance from Nigeria and her cultural distance from the accepted traditional role of an Igbo woman with her choice to be a single, working mother who writes fiction.

According to Emecheta, the noises of her children reminded her that despite leaving their abusive father and endeavoring to raise them on a meager library assistant and student salary, her children “had a home, a proper breakfast, clean clothes on their backs” and no worry about the origin and surety of their next meal (60). Hearing the gleeful noises of her five children as she wrote served as a reminder of her resilience in the face of destitute and undesirable circumstances. Knowing that her family was well motivated her work. Her children were not only the only family she had in London, they were tangible evidence of her successful resistance of global patriarchy and the gender-stifling traditions of her homeland. Emecheta believed that her children were not a hindrance to her work but held the position “I have to write because of them” (60).

The author’s admiration for her children is present in her work. This dynamic links the power she wields as both a mother and a writer. Associating her success in both realms to one another she admits, “most of my early novels, articles, poems and short stories are, like my children, too close to my heart. They are too real. They are too me” (61). Emecheta’s own connection of her mothering and writing identities positions her as a central figure for this project focused on women writing motherhood to resist oppressive power structures. She epitomizes the unique negotiation of mothering to transform her debased social position and communicates that powerful protest through her written work. Refusing to leave her children behind in Nigeria as she had witnessed many young women her age do, Emecheta is deliberate about the role her children would play in her uncertain future. As she became more successful in writing, this did not change. The fact that she mothers her children and produces all of her writing in England while deliberately maintaining her Nigerian identity and thematic focus position her as a transnational representative of Africana mothering as a site of resistance.



While *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* undoubtedly introduced Emecheta and her radical concepts of negotiating motherhood to the literary world, it is her fifth novel *The Joys of Motherhood* that most represents the strength and potential power women of the Diaspora possess through motherhood. Clarke characterizes the work as “a woman’s passionate defense and articulation of her pride as a mother” (*Last Word*). This novel is the focus of this study for two distinct reasons: 1) the circumstances that led to its creation and 2) its intentional focus on motherhood. Emecheta embeds issues of women and mothers in all of her works; however, *The Joys of Motherhood* came to be at one of her most intense challenges as a mother and, as a result, took to task the social issues that she believed led to that moment.

Emecheta wrote *The Joys of Motherhood* in six weeks—an amazing feat for a text so tightly packed with the complicated nuances of mothering. The writer produced the work as the result of an intense argument she had with her oldest daughter Florence Chiedu Onwordi. Chiedu and Emecheta shared a unique relationship that volleyed between mother/daughter and older sister/younger sister. Chiedu was named for Emecheta whose given first name is Florence. In the dedication of *Head Above Water*, Emecheta describes her daughter as “my childhood friend who I had when I was a child myself.” The author’s autobiography is dedicated to Chiedu as is *Second Class Citizen* in part (along with her other four siblings)—further underscoring the role motherhood played in the author’s career and success.

Before writing *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta argued about school fees with Chiedu. According to the writer, it was less the subject of their disagreement that led her to write the novel than her daughter’s reaction to the argument. Dissatisfied with her mother’s response to her requests for fees to attend a particular school, Chiedu challenged Emecheta’s motherhood by telling her she “was not the good mother” she thought she was and leaving the home to live with

her estranged father (*Head Above Water* 223). Chiedu seemed to understand the value Emecheta placed on her mother position and attacked the very root of it with her comments and actions. Emecheta admits to feeling instantly “so insecure, so afraid” at her daughter’s behavior during the argument (*Last Word*). She fell physically ill once Chiedu left and *The Joys of Motherhood* was born.

Emecheta’s visceral response to Chiedu’s behavior points to a moment in the author’s life that links her ideals on mothering and mothering practice distinctly to African custom. Remi Akujobi cues in on the notion that in Africa, the idea of self-sacrifice is centrally linked to motherhood (2). Akujobi asserts that “motherhood as experienced and practiced in Africa is...coloured with examples of self-sacrifice/giving and much more in the name of motherhood” (2). Reacting to Chiedu in such a monumental way and producing a work that illustrates the expectation of self-sacrifice in order to mother concretizes Emecheta’s work to African significance and makes her work distinct to her homeland despite its universal appeal. Further, it is evidence of what Petersen experienced when observing the arguments of African women in relation to the vital importance of strong mother/daughter relationships within African feminist discourse. Petersen notes that while the German women who attended 1981 “The Role of Women in Africa” conference held in Mainz debated whether they should attempt to “raise their mothers’ consciousness and teach them to object to their fathers,” the African women in the room held that congenial mother/daughter relationships where one does not discredit or derogate the other’s opinions or experiences were essential to their brand of feminism (Petersen 35). This notion pulses through Emecheta’s recounting of her clash with Chiedu before writing *The Joys of Motherhood*.

*The Joys of Motherhood* focuses on Nigeria during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, yet Emecheta incorporates timeless themes of patriarchal oppression perpetrated through female responsibility and repression in motherhood. As this text is written as a response to her daughter's leaving to live with her father, Emecheta covertly comments on the fear that her ex-husband might receive the acclaim for raising and caring for Chiedu despite his absence for most of her life. With all of her children possessing his last name, Emecheta's best means to combat his benefitting from her labor as a mother is to memorialize her efforts in her writing. She does so with *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* in a way that links those stories directly to her own life in London. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, she takes a more global approach that transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of her world. In the former texts, Adah is obviously Buchi. In the latter text, Nnu Ego is "all mothers" as the final dedication comes to acknowledge.

In an instance that might have discouraged other women from focusing so much of their life energy on motherhood, Emecheta channeled her fear into a work that challenges traditional concepts of mothering and creates new models for mother power. She admits being fearful at Chiedu's exit because she felt that she was going to exhaust her energy, life, and resources caring for her children "only for them to spit on my face and tell me that I was a bad mother" (*Head Above Water* 224). She produced the ironically titled text in a way that exposed her own fear of ending up like the heroine Nnu Ego—dead and alone having given everything to and for her children. Writing *The Joys of Motherhood* affected Emecheta in a similar way to *Second Class Citizen*. The author admits "it made me accept my lot" (225). Here, Emecheta acknowledges that she had focused her life and work on mothering and motherhood; although, the author does

not seem to associate having harnessed any social power from her mothering as this study asserts.

When Chiedu read the manuscript and realized that Emecheta had dedicated the somber text to her, she threatened to burn it as her father had done *The Bride Price*. Fearful of losing such an emotionally charged text that possessed links to her physical and psychological healing, Emecheta made more copies and changed the dedication to “to all mothers.” Opening *The Joys of Motherhood* with this cryptic epilogue binds the experience of the main character, Nnu Ego, to that of any mother inhabiting any identity or space. In refocusing the work away from her own tribulations with her daughter, Emecheta is considerate of the global experience of mothering. Although the 224-page text details the distinct experiences of womanhood (specifically motherhood) for an Igbo woman in early twentieth century Nigeria, Emecheta’s brief dedication alludes that “the joys” within the narrative exist as universally relatable to all who have held the mother role.

This novel begins in chaos. The unsettling and confusing first moments of the text invoke the lack of human control in childbirth. The reader struggles to grasp control of the action while the main character and focus of the action scrambles to make sense of her current plight—both perhaps the reactions Emecheta grappled with as she penned the text after having her own mother status challenged. The first chapter titled “The Mother” continues the irony of the book’s title as we learn Nnu Ego is no longer the mother of a living child. Her four-week-old son Ngozi has died without explanation and the young woman is reeling from the pain of loss. Discovering the dead child on his sleeping mat, Nnu Ego’s first reaction is to leave the scene. She backs out of the small room she shares with her husband with “her eyes unfocused and glazed” and her clumsy, fast-paced walk turns into a run (7). Embodying the traits of her deceased infant, her

senses are numb. They are only awakened by the “colour of the road which seemed to be that of blood and water”—a description eerily similar to childbirth’s accompanying bodily fluids (7). In the beginning of this text, the mother is alone and as isolated as the three-word dedication on the previous page.

By beginning the text with Nnu Ego’s seemingly failed mother identity, Emecheta enacts a complex critique on the role of the African woman and the oppression projected on African women specifically with the role of mothering. Nnu Ego is central to *The Joys of Motherhood*. Without her story, there is no text. Ogunyemi holds that having a family and mothering children, more specifically, lie at the center of the role of African women. To this end, Emecheta acknowledges how vital she considers mothering to be to her existence in her autobiography, but in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the author seems to present a much more complex consideration of the African woman’s worth. Akujobi suggests that the “childlessness and failed marriages” in *The Joys of Motherhood* “mandate a literary criticism that mirrors the importance of children in the African family” (3). However, centering Nnu Ego in the text and crafting the character as integral to the reader’s understanding and entrance into the Igbo culture privileges the character regardless of her wife and mothering status. Nnu Ego is relevant and necessary to the narrative notwithstanding her successes and failures as a wife and mother. With this, Emecheta pushes back against the culture that situates women’s value within their ability to bear and raise children. She also seems to absolve herself of the guilt she felt after her altercation with Chiedu in writing Nnu Ego this way.

Further, Emecheta clandestinely references the archetype of the mother goddess that exists in many cultures with the mention of the road whose color “seemed to be that of blood and water” in a way that resists the covertly oppressive image of the African woman as a life-giving goddess

figure (*The Joys* 7). Many cultures possess a female deity or figure who is hailed as a mother goddess. She is often characterized or associated with water to represent fertility and life. Hinduism has Durga. The Yoruba have Oshun and the Igbo along with other cultures from western, central, and southern Africa have various iterations of the *mami wata*<sup>16</sup> archetype. Christianity acknowledges Mary the mother of Jesus in this type of role. On the surface, the mother goddess or supreme mother figure appears to venerate the woman; however, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie points out that African women should resist the figuring of the African woman as a goddess mother as it is “an image that African male writers have helped in disseminating” that stifles the African woman under the guise of liberating her (Akujobi 3). Emecheta opens the text with Nnu Ego having lost Ngozi and not possessing the mother identity, yet she is still interesting to the reader. Thus, she sheds the honored mother goddess stereotype as necessary for the female protagonist to serve as the center of the story. She does not need to be a mother to matter in this moment.

Although she is no longer a mother when we meet her, Nnu Ego’s emotional turmoil and physical pain immediately draws the reader in through the lens of mothering. The disarray of the events of the first chapter become tangible as “the pain in her young and unsupported breasts” not only describes the letdown of her mother’s milk for a baby who has died, but also her state as a new wife and mother—young and unsupported (8). Emecheta’s visceral pain at having lost Chiedu for a short time after their argument is figuratively demonstrated here in the text as the physical repercussions of the separation from a child for whom one is intrinsically still accustomed to nourishing and providing care. This estrangement on the page and within the

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<sup>16</sup> Mami Wata is a water diety that exists in various cultures across the African Diaspora. Within Igbo culture, Mami Wata or mammy water represents the idealized image of the Igbo woman as life-giving.

author's life also represents the social exile mothers undergo as a community of simultaneous expectation and shame.

Emecheta's handling of mothering as a site of social resistance is complicated. She aligns with theorists like Ogunyemi who acknowledge that embracing motherhood exists as an integral part of female identity in Nigeria while doing what Akujobi describes in stating that, "feminists in Africa, while conceding that motherhood may at times operate in an oppressive manner have tried to read other meanings to motherhood, meanings that are empowering for women" (Akujobi 3). Grace Okereke credits Emecheta with producing novels like *Double Yoke* and *Destination Biafra* later in her career that go "beyond protest to show woman rising above her limitations successfully, mapping out survival strategies and achieving independence and fulfillment outside of marriage" and joins critics like Jonas Egbudu Akung who believe *The Joys of Motherhood* limits women to the confines of marriage and motherhood for meaningful contribution (Akung 29). While Emecheta may have very well become more deliberate and skillful in depicting the social oppression of women later in her career in part due to her increased study of sociology and lived experience, *The Joys of Motherhood* is not devoid of equitable characterizations of African women. Emecheta's creation of Nnu Ego and the mapping of her life struggles allows for a female character to wrest power and achieve liberation within the traditionally stifling confines of marriage and motherhood. Critics who deem *The Joys of Motherhood* as a text that negatively restricts women to the traditional family model and, thus, renders them incapable of any sort of social autonomy rest on the notion that power cannot be associated with these female-centric roles. There is danger in only associating power with realms where men customarily dominate like politics or economics. While prowess in either domain undoubtedly provides more access to self-determination and progress, achievements in

and through mothering must be acknowledged as profitable to the woman as well as the larger community. Emecheta presents a sophisticated scenario wherein mothering can achieve social and political power for women.

The widespread criticism of motherhood as a site of oppression for women is rooted in Western feminist thought whereas African feminisms acknowledge motherhood as a necessary undertaking for female autonomy. In her analysis of Nigerian novels written by and about African women, Sabine Jell Bahlsen exhibits Western feminisms tendency to diminish the position of motherhood in feminist struggle in asserting that the woman's "need and struggle for child care is detracting and the presence of children...keeps their mother from concentrating on important conversation (Bahlsen 36). Feminist theorist Lucia Valeska articulates the social debasement of women with children in arguing that although motherhood may be hailed as "the world's oldest and most significant female vocation," as the result of gender oppression, "failure is built into childraising"—making motherhood and success mutually-exclusive (Valeska 70, 72). Both Bahlman and Valeska conduct in-depth analyses on the role of motherhood and establish it as a status that limits women. However, their conclusions on mothering fail to consider contexts outside of Western realities. Nigerian feminist theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi describes ideas such as that of Bahlman and Valeska as the Westrocentrism of feminist scholarship that "make their case for gender from the narrow confines of the West" and formulate "grand claims about gender or women after having examined only one culture" (Oyewumi 1050). Granted that within Western culture there are institutions where women are prevented from participating in certain aspects of society because of their mother status—mainly those that allow them to gain social status or capital. But, as we learn from *The Joys of*



*Motherhood* and other texts within by African writers, women without children are isolated from sharing in certain aspects of the culture because they are not mothers.

Emecheta illustrated the complexity of this dynamic in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Nnu Ego*. Afraid that motherhood had isolated her to the realm of unproductiveness in her Western life and that she had failed to harness its liberating quality espoused in her native culture, she wrote a novel about her mothering fears. Emecheta defied the Western apprehension to motherhood by using mothering to become an author. She draws from her native cultural context by situating motherhood as a site for potential and unconventional power within her texts. Trading on her transnational identity in a manner that connects both Western and African feminist thought, she acknowledges the ways in which mothering responsibilities have both represented oppressive patriarchal power as well as a means for women to gain social and cultural influence.

Ogunyemi notes that one of the major departures between African feminisms and Western feminism “is the African obsession to have children” (133). The Nigerian womanist distinguishes Western feminism from African feminism on number of issues including what she terms as “a fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood” within Western feminism (Arndt 710). Emecheta draws out this tenet of the experience of African women in *The Joys of Motherhood* with *Nnu Ego*’s struggle to become pregnant in her first marriage (to Amatokwu). Emecheta adds further complexity by weaving in another dynamic of African feminisms that is not relevant in Western or African American feminism—polygamy. *Nnu Ego*’s social status as her first husband’s senior wife is greatly affected by her non-mother status. I am careful here not to characterize her as incapable of conception despite her having been deemed so in the text. Because her husband’s second wife conceives quite easily, the blame for the inability to conceive

is placed upon Nnu Ego. She is forced to contend with the agony of childlessness in isolation—after months of marriage and no conception “it had become her problem and hers alone” (*Joys* 31).

There is still a strong presence for the desire to mother in modern-day Africa. Ogunyemi shares that the desire for children has even superseded the desire to be involved in a married relationship for many modern African women. She alleges that recent female graduates from Nigerian universities often opt to be part of polygamous marriages in order to have children they can raise on their own terms who still have proximity to a present father. Ogunyemi claims that “they want children, but they also want to be free in marriage” which points to the existence of the deep desire to mother in the African female experience (Arndt 716). While Ogunyemi does not feel that this practice empowers women and, thus, is not feminist, she acknowledges it as unique to women in Africa seeking power. Kenyan feminist activist Wanjira Muthoni notices a similar practice in her own country and notes that “you find women graduates who marry or who have children with a married man” in present-day Kenya and that these women seem to “pick out the best of the two worlds. They can have children who have an official father and everything, but at the same time they have their freedom and all that” (717). Both Ogunyemi and Muthoni make a point of mentioning that the women who choose to enter polygynous relationships also possess advanced degrees. This seems to demonstrate that within their cultural context, these women believe their social power is more bound up in their mother status than it is their academic and professional achievement.

Emecheta illustrates this pressure to procreate that befalls African women from various influences. Within the first hours of Nnu Ego’s first marriage, her father equates a woman’s ability to conceive a child to her sexual virtue when he proclaims, “when a woman is virtuous, it

is easy for her to conceive” (31). This further links motherhood to social worth and status.

While Nnu Ego’s lack of conception is her own problem with which to contend, she is viewed as a disappointment to her native village and family as well as her husband’s village and family— “she was failing everybody. There was no child” (31). The obligation of conception mirrors that of maternal responsibility in being so heavily placed upon Nnu Ego. Once she begins to conceive, Nnu Ego is again held fully responsible by her husband for the well-being of their children. Emecheta creates a fictional circumstance that communicates a similar reality in her own life and merges moments that align with Western and African feminist struggles.

Unlike her main character, Emecheta immediately conceived upon being married. Although her weight had not been that of the shame of childlessness, she is charged with being the sole caregiver and disciplinarian for her children. Once she split from her husband, she was forced to assume full responsibility for their five children. She writes in *Head Above Water* that in reply to her request for assistance to support their children, her ex-husband responded, “I told you I would not be saddled with five kids” (*Head Above Water* 61). By her account, he completely disavows any responsibility for the lives and well-being of their children. In similar fashion, Amatokwu distances himself from any accountability for Nnu Ego’s childlessness, coldly commenting to her after months without conception, “I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line” (*Joy's* 32). Emecheta clearly communicates the social dynamic that issues of childlessness as well as childrearing belong to the female parent. This inclusion is further underscored in Nnu Ego’s second marriage where she bears nine children (seven of which live beyond infancy). The circumstances of her mother status change, yet the expectations that her femaleness renders her as breeder and provider do not.

Emecheta's incorporates other moments of irony beyond the title of the text in the scenarios that demonstrate women refashioning motherhood into a space of power and men who rely on patriarchal privilege to oppress mothers specifically. During Nnu Ego's first marriage, her community's desire for her pregnancy is wholly bound up in patriarchal advancement and control. While the character seeks to benefit from mother capital if she were to conceive a child with Amatokwu, it is important to note that this type of social mobility is limited and still relegates the female parent into the role of wresting power through a patriarchal framework. The *mother capital* to which Nnu Ego would have had access with Amatokwu's offspring would have positioned her as a more sovereign senior wife—a role fixed in patriarchy. She would have also garnered admiration for her father Nwokocha Agbadi. Despite his utter disgust with his own wives and mistresses once they become mothers, Agbadi's desire for his own daughter is that she become "a full woman, full of children" (*Joys* 153). This is, of course, because Nnu Ego's fertility and progeny reflect positively on Agbadi and his legacy. Her power would start and stop at the men in her life and would remain connected to their social autonomy.

At this point in the text, Emecheta exposes a reality for many mothers—the inability to perform motherhood on terms not rooted in patriarchal oppression and control. Theorists such as Jeffner Allen maintain that the stronghold of patriarchy on the definition and functions of motherhood situate the role as "dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free" (Allen 315). As the result of such an assertion, Allen rejects motherhood and believes that all women must do the same if justice is to be obtained for women across the world. Emecheta's inclusion of Nnu Ego's initial struggles to become a mother and subsequent discarding for not achieving mother status seems to jibe with

Allen's argument; however, I contend that Emecheta moves beyond a solution that seeks to abandon motherhood all together and privileges the African feminist notion that motherhood is important to female agency and autonomy. For the author, a refashioning (as opposed to relinquishing) of motherhood—her own and her character's—is far too vital to how black women can and will combat globally-pervasive, negative stereotypes. Mothering is just as key to Emecheta's survival in the Western world as it is to her success as a writer.

In choosing to take her children with her when she left Lagos and keep them all once she left her husband, Emecheta exhibits fierce resolve in the face of the persisting concept that motherhood limits and represses women in the Western world. Within *The Joys of Motherhood*, the author skillfully illustrates the various angles from which mothering responsibility can attack women's freedom and identity in an African context that typically paints the role as solely beneficial to the woman. Within the text, the reader is exposed to the ironic ideal that women should desire motherhood; however, motherhood might also make them undesirable. Nnu Ego's father is described as having lost sexual interest in his wives once "he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood" (*Joys* 10). Once Agbadi's wives became mothers, "he was soon bored and would rather go afield for some other exciting, tall, and proud female"—linking motherhood to the loss of desirability and female pride (10). Ironically, Nnu Ego is undesirable to Amatokuwu after she fails to conceive and described by her then husband as "dry and jumpy" and all-together unappealing (32). Emecheta indicts traditional expectations for motherhood in these moments in the text where the male characters are painted as fickle and callous while women like Nnu Ego are charged with devising solutions to appease their communities and regain their power.

Motherhood is correlated with loss of sexual allure in women throughout the text; however, men are associated with increased virility as the result of fathering offspring. Emecheta further indicts the double standard of parenthood for men versus women in Nnu Ego's second marriage to a man named Nnaife. Nnu Ego becomes pregnant almost immediately after being married off by her father to Nnaife. In allowing the character to conceive so quickly with Nnaife, Emecheta dismantles Amatokwu's projected masculinity. Although Nnu Ego still desires Amatokwu for his traditional rural lifestyle and physical build, she is allowed to attain her desire to mother with a man who seemingly possesses no regard for the customs of her rural community. The author aggressively challenges African masculinity within the text by shedding Amatokwu of his (in his inability to impregnate Nnu Ego) and increasing Nnaife's despite his less-respected occupation and untraditional way of life. Nnu Ego initially mocks Nnaife for his job as a clothes washer for white expatriates living in Nigeria. She chides him for his responsibility of washing the undergarments of his employer's wife—Mrs. Meers—quipping,

You behave like a slave! Do you go to her and say, 'Please madam crawl-crawl skin, can I sleep with my wife today?' Do you make sure the stinking underpants she wears are well washed and pressed before you come and touch me? [...] I want to live with a man, not a woman-made man. (50)

Here, Emecheta performs what Michel Foucault might describe as “exposing the mechanics of patriarchal power at the most intimate levels of women's experience” (“Michel Foucault: Feminism”). Nnu Ego tries to usurp social power from Nnaife by denigrating his maleness with a correlation to femininity. Nnaife is called a “woman-made man” by Nnu Ego alluding to his domestic occupation (*Joy's* 50). In this moment, Nnu Ego demonstrates that social power is seen as something that is intrinsically tied to masculinity. Although she is pregnant with her first

child at this point in the text, her only means of gaining status over her husband is to perform problematic masculinity. Performances and attitudes that simply desire women gaining power through the artifices of male power often taint feminist formations. Jana Sawicki explains that “the everyday practices through which power relations are reproduced has converged with the feminist project of analyzing the politics of personal relations and altering gendered power relations at the most intimate levels of experience 'in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality’” (Sawicki 93). Emecheta shows how this surfaces in African cultures and simultaneously reveals the counterproductive result in the attempt to grab power through sexist cultural conventions in Nnaife’s response.

Despite Nnu Ego’s terse insults, Nnaife reclaims power by referencing her pregnancy as evidence of his manliness—“I am happy to know I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant” (50-51). Here, Emecheta challenges the notion that bearing children affords African women automatic privileged status and warns against the belief that female agency can be gained for women simply by becoming pregnant as credit for the conception is still usurped by the male parent. In disallowing Nnu Ego’s verbal abuse of Nnaife to overpower his claim to masculinity, Emecheta illustrates that resistance to the patriarchal control of motherhood necessitates a more complex approach. The author also challenges African feminisms that embrace motherhood as it is constructed by patriarchal thought.

Whereas scholars like Allen advocate for the rejection of motherhood on the part of women for the belief that “women are mothers because within patriarchy women have no choice except motherhood,” Emecheta presents motherhood as a choice that contributes positively to the fabric of entire communities as well as the wellness of the woman who chooses it (Allen 316). Emecheta acknowledges that not all women make the choice to mother, even those who have

biologically given birth to children. In *Head Above Water*, she openly admits to deep-seated resentment of her own mother for leaving her and her brother with relatives when she remarried after their father's death, stating

It took me a long time to forgive my mother for remarrying when she did, and leaving us to suffer in the houses of relatives. If we had been older than seven and five, I would have not been so bitter [...] If our mother had stayed with us we would still have been very poor but our childhood would not have been so terrible. I did not want the kids I brought into the world to have a similar experience. (222)

In this real-life reference, Emecheta shares the belief that a choice not to mother does not always simply attack patriarchy and its control over the definition of the role. She asserts that there are sometimes human casualties in the person of children who do not have a choice in the matter. In this, Emecheta advocates for lives that move beyond hers and those of mothers at large. She seems to indicate that choosing to mother as a black woman possesses implications for the global community.

Through Nnu Ego and other mothers in the text, Emecheta depicts the choice to mother for a purpose larger than self. Those who impose motherhood on the women in the world of the text fail to fully grasp the magnitude of the power each woman possesses within her respective circumstance. While, on the surface, these women are still abused and neglected within their marriages, families and communities, through their choice to mother on their own terms (*mothering agency*), they create a guarantee that generations beyond themselves will have access to social upward mobility and a more holistic concept of how motherhood exists in their worlds.



One of the most remarkable moments of mothering agency occurs between Nnu Ego and the other women who are negotiating their mother status away from their native homes in Ibuza. As a young wife, Nnu Ego is forced to adjust to living in Lagos—a bustling metropolis compared to her native village Ibuza. This is an adjustment that many other young women like her must make as well. In this example of *mothering the community*, Emecheta portrays the manner in which these young women mother one another in order to withstand the social pressure of new surroundings and lack of emotional support from their male counterparts. Having lost her biological mother in her own birth, Nnu Ego experiences the guidance of women to benefit her life holistically from the other Ibuza wives living in Lagos. They attend monthly meetings which are described as doing the character “a great deal of good” (*Joys* 52). At these meetings, Nnu Ego is taught by other women how to “start her own business so that she would not have only one outfit to wear” and, demonstrating their business savviness and ingenuity, the other Ibuza wives “let her borrow five shillings from the women’s fund” to assist in her first business venture (52). These women nurture Nnu Ego differently than her father’s wives had after her mother’s death.

The women in her Ibuza village prepare her to marry and conceive children—encouraging her to succumb to the expected role of breeder to her husband. Emecheta’s own mother advised her to leave formal school to sell oranges in the market when her father died—a suggestion meant to move her into the realm of female responsibility as opposed to the more masculine realm of formal education and advancement. The other Ibuza wives that Nnu Ego meets with each month in Lagos provide her with tools to independently navigate life and support herself and any children she might have.

The older wives in the Lagos-Ibuza circle tell Nnu Ego that her new business will not only allow her to sustain a bit of economic independence, but that she will also be able to think beyond being a mother who, out of nerves, might “bite her fingers about her coming child” (52). These women encourage motherhood that takes on a much more empowered form than that of women in Nnu Ego’s village. Their support allows the character to realize enough success in her new business to repay her small loan and purchase attire for herself. Her independence is also evidenced in her actions on the night she gives birth to her first child—Ngozi.

Although Nnu Ego realizes she is in labor with the child she has desired all of her adult life, she “made sure she had her evening market first” or attended to her business before she settles in to birth the child (53). This exposes her budding new mindset on the type of mother she has chosen to become—one not stifled by her maternal role but motivated by it. She purposely does not involve Nnaife in the birth of their child. Instead, she enlists the help of her neighbor’s wife Cordelia to aid her in childbirth. When Nnu Ego thanks Cordelia for her assistance, Cordelia’s comment underscores the familial relationship the Ibuza women in Lagos have fostered with one another—describing their bond as that of “sisters on a pilgrimage” (53). The reference to pilgrimage connotes that the women have a final destination that is not their new Lagos home but somewhere more meaningful and significant to their holistic health and wellbeing. Their destination is undoubtedly linked to their autonomy as women and mothers.

While Nnu Ego endures labor in the kitchen they share, the women discuss this odd custom of the men sleeping through the birth of their children as one that has come to be in the city (as opposed to the village). Cordelia quips that “they stopped being men long ago” and Nnu Ego comments that “in Ibuza, when a wife is in labour the husband becomes restless. But these our men here sleep through it all” (53). Here, Emecheta correlates male detachment from parenting

as enhanced in cities or spaces of economic progress. In Emecheta's own life, her husband becomes abusive and vacates his role as an active father to their children in a space removed from their homeland and traditional customs. The author has something to say about the detrimental effect seeming progress has on the weight the female parent is forced to bear. As the men become more Western, the women are left with more substantial roles in the affairs of the home and their children. Thus, mothering is further complicated by patriarchal progress.

At one point in this part of the text, it is noted that "In Lagos a wife [...] had to work" and "finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comforts, in some cases for the children's school fees, was on her shoulders" (52-53). As Nnu Ego's condition changes, so do the expectations of motherhood. Emecheta pens female characters that not only adjust, but restructure their community to ensure their own benefit in the midst of the shifting weight of their responsibilities. Nnu Ego and Cordelia only wake their husbands after Ngozi is born. Nnu Ego comments that they should "call the men to enjoy their triumph" (53). Emecheta's intentional irony in the text's title finds its way into the narrative and her main character at this point. Nnu Ego's statement references that the social credit men receive for the conception and bearing of offspring, especially male offspring, yet there is a sardonic tone to her mention of the men who the entire community of Ibuza wives acknowledge do not contribute to the central functions of their lives in Lagos. The mothers within this community operate in the awareness that they exist as the most necessary entity of the community. Their support for one another through entrepreneurial training, economic development, physical health practice, and emotional guidance position them to resist the persisting ideals surrounding women and motherhood in their society whether or not this is acknowledged by men.

Emecheta focuses very little of the narrative on the discomforts mothers experience during gestation (i.e. morning sickness, premature contractions, sore breasts, etc.). Her work centers on the obstacles that mothers endure once their children exist outside of their bodies—most of these issues are exacerbated or created by social conditions projected onto the female parent. This concentration on women performing mothering duties for children once they have been born into the world presents the opportunity to consider women who are not biological mothers as mother figures as well. After all, Emecheta’s dedication “to all mothers” is nebulous and inclusive and allows for a wide cross-section of women to connect with the narrative, main character, and the satiric joys of being a mother.

The female characters in *The Joys of Motherhood* expand their acts of resistant mothering in their care for children—both their own and those of other mothers within their communities. While the majority of the text focuses on Nnu Ego’s care for her own children, the most remarkable moments in terms of resistance through motherhood exist in other women and mothers supporting the main character. There are many instances in the narrative that expose Emecheta’s incorporation of mothering activism through *mothering babies*. I have selected to focus on one that seems to encourage Nnu Ego’s mother practice and complicate the idea of *mother capital*.

When the Meers family unexpectedly and abruptly vacate Nigeria for England, Nnaife leaves his family to find work and Nnu Ego is, ultimately, left with two children for whom she must provide as there is no guarantee that Nnaife will send money or return. She is forced to move to an even more urban area with a toddler (Oshia) while pregnant with her third child and her business training, by the Ibuza wives, becomes the sole source of the family’s means of survival. In this new stage of her life, Nnu Ego has another community of women and mothers to support

her survival. One such community mother is Mama Abby. This older woman advises Nnu Ego on how to gain autonomy over her circumstance in many ways; however, the most significant is in how Mama Abby mothers Oshia.

We learn that Mama Abby has given birth to two children—a son Abby and a daughter Bena. Having disowned her daughter for a premarital affair, her entire identity and social status is associated with her son. His fully-funded education by an estranged, European father and fair skin allow Mama Abby to buy “her way into respectability through her son, who was destined to become one of the leaders of the new Nigeria” (108). Mama Abby is the most poignant example of a woman operating in *mother capital* in the text. She skillfully ensures that the wealth bequeathed her by her British husband will be extended through her son’s success. She not only invests her time and energy into her son’s future; she dedicates her fortune to his education denying herself the luxuries of a fanciful home. In the text, she is regarded as a “wise woman” who “saved all the money to use for her son’s education” (107). Emecheta goes on to develop her as a woman who resists the circumstances of her spousal abandonment by spending all of her resources on her son with the belief that “that would secure her a happy old age” (108).

On the surface, it appears that Mama Abby possesses little to no agency; however, a more keen observation of the character unearths an African woman who dictates for herself how her life will play out through the utility of her mothering practice. Like the Ibuza wives, Mama Abby deliberately shares her mothering ideology and practice with Nnu Ego by guiding the younger mother in raising Oshia to become a guarantee of her “happy old age” (108). Mama Abby refers to Oshia as “our son” when addressing Nnu Ego about the young boy and her plans for him—exhibiting her efforts to not only show Nnu Ego how to lead her son to success, but to actually act as a surrogate mother to Oshia herself (107). This concept of *mothering babies*

resists the notion that link black mothers to the expectation of caring for the children of others due to some sort of innate maternal instinct and non-threatening character. Mama Abby's mothering of Oshia foreshadows a future independent Nigeria and focuses on defying social odds for women like herself and Nnu Ego.

Notably, Mama Abby embraces certain traits of patriarchy to maintain her status. She disowns her daughter for defying the constraints of prescribed female virtue and very obviously privileges male children over female children as we see male characters do throughout the text. Mama Abby occupies a space that still relegates her as oppressed despite her negotiation of her mothering practice to rise beyond her repressed lot. She performs the abjection she has suffered onto her daughter. Rejecting her to prove that she does not possess the same sexual tendencies; that she is not the failure she has deemed her daughter. For Mama Abby, freedom, acceptance, and success exist in maleness and her mothering benefits men far more than it does her.

In her mothering of Oshia, Mama Abby does little more than speak encouragingly and devote attention to the young boy; however, these acts are significant considering the questionable prospect of a prosperous future a boy of his class and cultural background might have. As Oshia is in the throes of overcoming a life-threatening illness, Mama Abby offers to take him on a day trip to "the island"—exciting the young boy and accelerating his recovery (106). This special attention juxtaposes the harsh, inequitable treatment Nnaife endures at the hands of his white employers and the colonial government. Throughout the text, Emecheta highlights the demeaning abuse many Nigerian men endured during the early twentieth century as the result of imperialism and World War I. Nnaife falls subject to the ills of both and is ultimately debased. Nnu Ego and Oshia's adopted community mothers work to prevent the young boy from suffering the same fate as his father. While they are not economically equipped to ensure Oshia's

achievement, the boy is raised in an environment that impresses upon him the inevitability of his success. In the end, he stops at nothing to attain that life-long promise embedded in him by his mother and the community of mothers that include Mama Abby.

Mothering of Oshia (the eldest of Nnu Ego's living children) continues in the consideration of *mothering the stomach*. Examining the way in which food and feeding are woven into the duties of motherhood within this text allows for consideration of women who are not biological mothers as practitioners of resistant mothering as well. Throughout the text, there is the mention of "women who wanted babies who were invariably told by the native doctors that the only way they would conceive was if they fed other children," hosting *sarabs*<sup>17</sup> (99). There are co-wives feeding the children of other co-wives and neighbor women who share a kitchen and foodstuffs to secure the survival of all of their families. When Oshia almost dies due to malnourishment because Nnu Ego is alone, pregnant, and unable to provide balanced nutrition for herself and her child, it is a female neighbor with no children (Iyawo Itsekiri) who silently diagnoses the young boy and comes to the mother's and son's aid with a yam stew that literally saves the family from certain death. Food and feeding very evidently serve as a means of resistance to the obvious oppression of hunger, but beyond feeding to survive physically, Emecheta shows moments where the women use food to empower themselves in their diminished social positions and ensure the children of their communities exceed the low expectations the world holds for them.

One of the most blatant instances of food resistance in the text is the short-lived and unsuccessful cooking strike Nnu Ego and Adaku wage against their husband Nnaife. The women unite and deny their expected wifely duties to demand their husband provide more money to feed their children and sustain the home. During this protest, the two women only

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<sup>17</sup> "unofficial parties where food was free for all" (*Joy's* 99)

deny Nnaife food—“they fed their children secretly” (134). This act of defiance does more than challenge Nnaife’s autonomy and control in the home. It allegorically speaks to what will be required for Nigeria at large to become independent from Great Britain in several more decades—united resistance and sacrifice. Although their protest yields only violent physical and verbal abuse from Nnaife and is wholly in vain in relation to their demands, it plants a figurative seed in many of the characters and shifts their mindsets.

Emecheta includes an allusion to Nnu Ego realizing the inequities of her social position as a mother and senior wife at this point in the action in a way she has not previously. If feminism is most concerned with unearthing the inequities in the way that power is constructed, then it is the food protest waged by Nnu Ego and Adaku that uncovers this dynamic for the two women in the text. Nnaife only relents to give Nnu Ego extra money for food for the household once she debases herself by begging him. He condescendingly responds to her pleas by saying, “All right, I shall see what I can manage to give you when I come back tonight. You have learned your lesson, senior wife” (137). Although she achieves her aim in getting her husband to agree to devote more of his earnings to help feed their children, it is revealed that the true hope of the protest was to alter the power structure of the home. Nnu Ego is disappointed in the outcome despite the promise for more money because it occurred to her that “she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife” (137).

Nnu Ego reflects an even more profound understanding of patriarchy’s unjust control over women through motherhood in stating, “it was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a women’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife would never dream of leaving her children” (137). Here, Emecheta begins to meaningfully unpack what contemporary theories on the role of motherhood in feminism assert. As a character, Nnu



Ego starts to shed her complicity and compliance with the stifling traditional construct of motherhood. Though she was raised by a father who engrained this aspect of their culture into her, she begins to pull from the spirit of her deceased mother Ona who defies tradition in many ways as it relates to mothering before her death. In a sense, both characters come to a realization of what Amber Kinser argues regarding women's lives and the activities in which they engage—such as mothering. Kinser holds that female obligations such as motherhood are seen as “less interesting, less important, and less worthy of economic, political, religious, and historical attention and support” in the dominant narratives of many cultures (3). As the result of this dynamic in her own culture and community, Nnu Ego has a revelation that leads her to more exacting concerted attempts to dismantle and redistribute the power Nnaife, her father, and patriarchy as a whole have held over her. In doing so, Nnu Ego creates opportunities for her and her female children to obtain access to “more authority, better resources, and higher status” (Kinser 3). Thus, Nnu Ego's endeavors lead to the “ability to act in ways that are self-determined” and exist as an agent “of [her] own needs and desires, including determining and meeting the needs of [her] children” (3).

This astute assessment of the benefit of challenging a power structure which subjugates femaleness and motherhood articulates Nnu Ego's desires in a text produced eight decades before Kinser's publication. In allowing her main character to realize such an informed concept of resistance, Emecheta demonstrates the deep roots of protesting with and on the part of motherhood within her native culture. The fact that the author writes this text at a time in her life when she was experiencing the weight of motherhood in a new way illustrates her consideration of the ways motherhood as constructed by patriarchy had stifled her own life. In this inclusion, Emecheta distinctly departs from theorists like Allen who call for a “collective evacuation from

motherhood” (Allen 328). The writer instead posits the necessity of removing the male-dominated strictures from the female role in order to obtain true justice for women and mothers.

Nnu Ego’s characterization complicates ideals of mothering and patriarchal power. Emecheta creates a dynamic in which motherhood can be viewed as a two-edged sword—cutting both those who achieve its status and those who do not. On the surface of this text, the author writes a narrative in which it seems the only option for any sort of social power and fulfillment albeit limited for women is through motherhood. As the result, many have read *The Joys of Motherhood* as a tragic, cautionary tale that confirms motherhood as a site of oppression for women. Kinser notes that radical Western feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s considered “joy in motherhood” a “false consciousness” (7). Yet, Emecheta’s skillful narration, written only few years after these sentiments began to become popular in the Western feminist discourse, moves beyond simply lamenting the woes of motherhood and gives life to concepts put forth by Western feminist writers Jessie Bernard and Adrienne Rich during the same era with a sensibility distinct to African women and women of the African Diaspora.

Kinser explains that theorists like Bernard and Rich resist the notion that motherhood fundamentally exists as an oppressive state for women and make “important distinctions between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and women’s actual experiences of mothering”—allowing for a conversation focused on redefining motherhood by the women who are actually living in the role (Kinser 7). Emecheta makes this line of thinking practical with her telling of Nnu Ego and the other mother characters within *The Joys of Motherhood*. It is important to note that I am not asserting that Emecheta borrows from or intentionally aligns herself with these Western feminists. Rather, she expands the reach of Western feminist ideology by centering it on African female realities. Zahra Barfi and Sariéh Alaei maintain that Emecheta’s “creative

discourse [...] casts further light upon the issue of gender oppression in African feminist study” and “furthers Western feminist ideology” and I agree with this (12). In fact, Emecheta openly resisted any affiliation with Western feminism. She expands the work of thinkers like Bernard and Rich through a purposeful Africana lens.

Like Simone’s Aunt Sarah persona at the opening of “Four Women,” Nnu Ego and the women of *The Joys of Motherhood* must be seen for more than the struggle and marginalization they suffer in a world that only considers their practical utility to sustain the lives of others. Simply telling their stories—Aunt Sarah in a song and Nnu Ego’s in a narrative—amplifies the voices of women throughout history and space who, on the surface, fit neatly into their prescribed stereotypical characterizations, yet defy oppression through their adept and covert resistance within the roles they inhabit. Emecheta’s text situates mothering as “a liberating practice” by indicting the institutions that seek to define it and generating a model wherein mothers can wrest and maintain power (Gumbs xv).

## **CONCLUSION: FOUR WOMEN RESIST**

It is a likely tendency to assume that because motherhood transcends cultural distinction that all mothers have the same responsibilities in their respective communities; however, like any other social archetype, mothers are subject to categorization based upon socio-economic and cultural associations. Thus, mothers who in their very identity are figured as less autonomous possess far different social expectations in their maternal role. These mothers—black mothers—abide in a dissimilar space compared to white mothers. Their obligations surpass that of the mother role to incorporate their socially-inferior position as black women. Having been laden with an image that relegated her relevance to domestic and maternal duties, the black woman occupies a complicated space of utility and invisibility in the dominant narrative. In opposition to this problematic reduction of the black female identity, the black women writers of this study took to their pens to perform a tropological revision of the black mother. These writers continue a strong tradition of resistance with their innovative use of black mothers in their work and fortify the cultural bond between mothers connected by their Africana experiences and identities.

The mothering trope exists in black women's literature beyond the four authors of this study. The frequent presence of central mother characters in black literature is linked to the separation that is indicative of the Diaspora. As it relates to African American women's writing specifically, illustrating the continuity of mothering practices between West African countries and the United States provides an opportunity to reclaim lost ancestry and resists the alienation from Africa inherent in the African American experience.

Ikechukwu Okafor-Newsum claims that, “African-American cultural workers engage in the restoration of their folk traditions and their ancestral past in an effort to hold on to the African side of their black selfhood, and to their humanity” (219). Considering this, both Bambara and Cary construct cultural reclamation projects hinged on the rootedness of black motherhood. Emecheta’s work reaches out to the Diaspora with themes present in the realities of black women’s experiences all over the world. She bonds her life to theirs and crafts a transnational unity. Adichie’s novel communicates a kindred experience of longing for liberation and belonging in Nigerian characters who ultimately seek respite in the United States.

Whereas Zala envisions a manifestation of Africa in Epps, Alabama to shield her children from falling prey to the crimes perpetrated against black bodies in Atlanta, Ifeoma moves her three children to the US to remedy having lost her university job which renders her unable to provide for them. Nnu Ego is forced to take her first surviving child, Oshia, to a more metropolitan area of Lagos where Igbos live among Yorubas as well as other ethnic groups. She ultimately raises her children in a space that mirrors the Diaspora and depends on the kindness of the larger community of Nigerians living near her. Mercer’s quest for freedom and autonomous mothering leads her to the Quick family who serve as the primary support for her escape from slavery. The Quick family assist Mercer with renaming herself, caring for her children, and absconding away from her owner. Notably, Tyree gifts Mercer five hundred dollars to aid in her moving with her children to Canada to solidify her freedom at the end of the text. Throughout the narrative, this sum of money is believed to have been lost to a Back to Africa plan orchestrated by the late eldest Quick sibling. All four texts link Africa to black people in America or a large diverse community of black people. James H. Meriwether speaks to the trend of African American texts invoking Africa and contextualizes such occurrences as moments

when “black Americans imagined Africa [as] a land the vast majority of blacks never visited but a place that they frequented in their mind” (qtd. in Holloway 94). Of relevance to this study, Nina Simone even relocated to Liberia to escape an abusive marriage and raise her daughter. The message in these types of inclusions is clear—freedom requires community and the motherland is at the center of the Diasporic community.

As black writers center Africa—the motherland—in their works focused on liberation, black women writers like Emecheta, Cary, Bambara, and Adichie center black mothers in their narratives. In *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, Karla Holloway asserts that the “biographical history of West African and African American women suggests that the imaginative literature of these women may be a significant source of cultural continuity” (12). In other words, there are connections in the writing of black women across the Diaspora. Mothering is one of those connections.

By definition, mothering is pragmatic and limited. The dictionary defines what it means to mother in these terms—*to bring up or give birth to a child*. This description of mothering negates the complexities of the role and the women who fill it. While the widely-accepted definition of *mother* exists as a reductive and limited notion that fails to acknowledge the socially fixed nature of the role of a mother, the expectation of black mothers throughout history has contributed problematically to the forced and ill-informed image of black women across the global community.

Defining motherhood as solely existent only when associated with the birth or rearing of a child lacks consideration of the vital role of the female parent beyond years when their children need support with the most practical needs—feeding, grooming, etc. The traditional ideal of motherhood disregards much of what a mother can be beyond birthing and feeding babies.

Limiting black motherhood in this way robs black women and their communities of one of their most significant modes of resistance.

The history of disregard for the liberating capacity of black mothering in dominant culture serves as evidence of the deep roots that exist for black women's struggle for social freedom and autonomy. Social opposition to the necessity for black women's liberation also has a long history. Sherri Barnes expresses that "from the antislavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century, continuing through the black and women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, up to today's contemporary black feminist activism, black American women have sought to have a voice in two centuries of liberation struggles that had silenced or ostracized them" (Barnes). African women, too, have suffered silencing at the hands of dominant culture as well as justice movements supporting white women and patriarchy. Black women continue to experience the problematic placement between championing the realities of their gender identity and demanding rights for their race.

Each of the four novels in this study possesses manifestations of a melding of African and African American feminist thought and challenges the idea that African women must abide in a space that forces the frustrations of their race and gender onto their backs. Felix Mnthali's poem titled "Letter to a Feminist Friend" provides insight into the complexities plaguing women of the African diaspora in terms of their "choice of subject" in freedom work (Petersen 252).

I will not pretend  
to see the light  
in the rhythm of your paragraphs:  
illuminated pages  
need not contain  
and copy-right  
on history

My world has been raped  
looted  
and squeezed  
by Europe and America  
and I have been scattered  
over three continents  
to please Europe and America  
AND NOW  
the women of Europe and America  
after drinking and carousing  
on my sweat  
rise up to castigate  
and castrate  
their menfolk  
from the cushions of a world  
I have built!  
Why should they be allowed  
to come between us?  
You and I were slaves together  
uprooted and humiliated together  
Rapes and lynchings –  
the lash of the overseer  
and the lust of the slave-owner  
do your friends ‘in the movement’  
understand these things?  
...  
No, no, my sister,  
My love,  
first things first!  
Too many gangsters  
still stalk this continent



too many pirates  
too many looters  
far too many  
still stalk this land –

...

When Africa  
at home and across the seas  
is truly free  
there will be time for me  
and time for you  
to share the cooking  
and change the nappies –  
till then,  
first things first! (qtd. in Petersen 36, 37)

In the poem, Mnthali charges women of the African Diaspora with putting “first things first!”—first racial equality, then gender equality if there is time (37). Mnthali’s poem explicitly demonstrates the complicated dynamic between proponents of black liberation and black feminism and the tendency these movements have had to move away from one another and exist in two separate realms. His straightforward reference to duties associated with motherhood condescendingly conflates black women’s roles and identities and their usefulness with domesticity.

Mnthali’s poem does not isolate his distaste for the focus on black female social justice on the continent of Africa. Like the four authors and their novels which center on the effects of systematic oppressions on the global community of black women and the resistance necessary to thwart their influence, Mnthali speaks to all the women of the Diaspora. While the poem is grounded in Africa with references distinct to Malawi and surrounding communities, Mnthali expands of the borders of the African community and his harsh critique in the line “When

Africa/at home and across the seas/is truly free/there will be time for me/and time for you/to share the cooking/and change the nappies—/till then,/first things first!” “Across the seas” invokes the Diaspora and a kindred experience for black people—especially as it pertains to cultural oppression (37).

Mnthali groups his African feminist friend with black women all over the world and binds their collective, rightful role to mothering duties (“cooking” and changing “the nappies”) in support of movements focused solely on racial equality. He insinuates that she must take on the task of caring for the children and the larger community before her own desires and rights can be attended to or even considered. Despite the poet’s concentrated focus on African women, the marginalization of black women in America is also present in this poem. For Mnthali, the focus on black women’s repression over that of the black man is an issue plaguing the quest for freedom of the entire African Diaspora or Africana community.

The poet opens his work with his lack of willingness to align himself or empathize with a movement that champions the rights and roles of women. He emphatically disavows any association with feminism and discredits its usefulness in his community. He goes on to lament the black man’s lot in life as the primary bearer of imperialist rage and aggression. Although Mnthali is slow to acknowledge the nuanced oppression of black women, he quickly invokes rape—a crime most commonly reported when the victim is female. His choice to use the term rape to describe imperialism’s effect on African land and people attempts to connect the experience of racial oppression to that of gender oppression. By using this crime that is predominately perpetrated against women, Mnthali tries to manipulate his female subject. In Mnthali’s poem, Africa is female. She is “squeezed” and “raped” and she is the only female who is worth supporting in his perspective (36).

Mnthali's derisive sentiments towards feminism exist beyond him. Feminist formations in the West have long been criticized for co-opting oppression into a phenomenon that affects white womanhood. Susan Arndt points out that, among African feminists, "one central critique is that feminism does not see beyond Western societies" (710). Thus, the idea that feminism is not African is shared by some African men and women alike. While promoting *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie was told by a fellow Nigerian female academic that "feminism [is] un-African" (*We Should All Be Feminists* 10). Adichie recalls her countrywoman's remark in *We Should All Be Feminists* possessing the notion that "feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African, and I was only calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books" (10). This rift between female autonomy and African identity has a longstanding history.

Mnthali's poem succinctly demonstrates this dynamic—staunchly opposing the adoption of a feminist agenda for women of African descent. Then, there is Mnthali's dismissive description of the division of labor within domestic and communal settings. In his patriarchal privilege, the writer diminishes domestic tasks such as cooking and caring for children as inferior and assigns them indefinitely to women—fixing the female gender into a position of subservience and servitude to benefit the larger community. Ironically, food and posterity are what propel every society. None can exist absent of one or the other. So, by pointedly disenfranchising women, Mnthali underscores the necessity for them to take on a specific identity (tied to activities aligned with mothering) in order for the entire community to not only thrive but become "truly free."

Mnthali charges women of the African Diaspora with putting "first things first!"—first racial equality, then gender equality (Petersen 37). His poem demonstrates the complicated dynamic between proponents of black liberation and black feminism and the tendency these movements have had to move away from one another and exist in two separate realms. His

straightforward reference to duties associated with motherhood also conflates black women's roles and identities and their usefulness with traditional mothering. My work in this project seeks to demonstrate how African women writers have forced the world to look beyond the stifling ideals espoused by individuals like Mnthali and other liberation formations.

This disenfranchised idea of black mothering is pervasive and deep-seated in the universal concept of motherhood. While diminutive ideas surrounding what it means to mother crosses generational and cultural borders, black motherhood is perhaps the most disregarded faction of the social construct. Black women's identities have been shrouded in the expectation and responsibility attached to motherhood regardless of their mother status. The role of a mother exists as a social construct defined by the larger society and assigned solely to women. Melina Abdullah acknowledges that "mothering is not exclusively a function of biology," but that societal mores and expectations shape the role in a way that demands of women specific actions and behaviors if they are to be deemed productive and good mothers (60). As the result, black women do not have to exist as biological mothers to be trapped in the expectation of the role.

From arrival in the New World as human cargo in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to their debased social positioning throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, black women in America have been forced to care for the offspring of others. Despite civil progress, this social role persists for black women in the United States. African American women's identities are bound up in domestic and maternal expectation. Traits linked to maternal responsibilities, such as feeding, cooking, nursing the sick, and childcare have become inherently linked to the black woman's prescribed identity in the Western imagination. These duties of maternal obligation largely characterize the black woman in many narratives (oral and written, social and historical). Failure to submit or comply with this expectation often relegates the African American woman further

into the marginalia of American society. Thus, the impact of the construct of mothering is more problematically nuanced when it is projected onto black women.

Just as black women's bodies and identities have been manipulated to literally and figuratively serve white supremacy, the manipulation of black motherhood by dominant culture is derivative of this dynamic. The attack on black women's autonomy in crafting an ideal of black motherhood is global. The African Diaspora forms a transnational community of black cultures and identities where displacement has made ownership of anything (land, names, etc.) difficult—including one's own children. The construction of the Diaspora by colonialism, imperialism, and slavery has had a great effect on the makeup of the mother role for black women. The black woman's humanity is unjustly linked to domestic responsibility and, thus, the traditional constraints of mothering. This association transcends global and temporal borders. Understanding the broadness and heterogeneity of the Diaspora led to the engagement of Nigeria and the United States as sites where black mothers demonstrate mothering practices that resist the oppressive systems designed distinctly to disenfranchise them and their communities.

Black motherhood, in America particularly, was originally constructed by white hegemony. Motherhood exists as a social position in which the ideal image of women is bound up; however, there are distinct nuances in the definition of a woman's ideal role largely predicated on race. Enslaved African women were stripped of whatever model of motherhood held by their respective cultures upon being forced into the Middle Passage. Once they arrived on North American shores, they were obligated to succumb to the roles assigned to them by the white supremacist regime fueling the slave trade. Like black bodies and lives, black motherhood possesses a semiotic relationship to white identities. The black mother could not be what the

white mother was allowed to be and the white mother did not desire the black mother's unsavory and grueling lot.

One of the most heinous atrocities perpetrated on black bodies is that of forced free labor under the threat of violent abuse and death. We tend to project this as having the most substantive effect on black men and, when black women are included, the focus of the ills of slavery still rests on the brutal effects of manual labor. The labor of childbirth is minimized and overlooked as the fundamental underpinning that sustained American slavery more than anything. Black babies born to black mothers populated the most profitable economic system in modern history.

The history of colonialism and imperialism further complicates the manner in which the traditional construct of motherhood affects women of color—specifically women of the African Diaspora. Women who were stripped from their communities along the coast of west Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trade were immediately stripped of any right to mother. Their children became property. They were denied any association with their offspring unless there was a need to nourish a crying infant. Restricted mothering was forced upon them; revolutionary mothering was denied them.

In this project, I have sought to highlight the ways black or Africana mothering exists as activism and how these four black women authors demonstrate this dynamic within their work. This discussion of the black woman's historically fixed role as mother and the metaphoric mule for what larger society deems unsavory touches upon how both feminist and cultural justice formations have required black women to make a choice as to which movement they will align themselves. This sort of ultimatum diminishes the black female experience and reduces the ability to fashion aspects of black women's realities into outright resistance.

Struggle inaugurated and led by black women in both Nigeria and the United States has a deep and long history. Both global spaces have a history of resistance movements where black women pushed back against social issues affecting their distinct identities. During some of the most socially tumultuous times in both Nigeria and the United States, black women's issues occupied the bottom of the proverbial totem pole. This inequitable lack of consideration often called for black women to choose whether they would join white women in championing women's rights or side with black men to advocate for civil and racial justice. Both formations, however, denied black women the opportunity to choose themselves and issues that pertain to how they exist in the larger community such as sexuality, economic power, and, for the purposes of this study, motherhood.

The brutally-enforced, prescribed roles of enslaved African women in Europe, South America, and North America during chattel and racial slavery supported by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade inaugurates this limited portrayal of black women and generates its global implications. Expectations for the black woman's role in various societies and communities find their fixity in definitions crafted by powers that sought to control and benefit from the control of black women and their bodies. The projected and narrow image of black women in dominant discourse denies the black woman agency in the fashioning of her own personhood.

The complexity of the mothering role rests in its acceptance as a traditional construct that limits women as well as a tool of resistance to dismantle the marginalization of women. To embed ownership into black motherhood in each national context is an act of resistance. Black mothers were not meant to have control. Zala, Mercer, Ifeoma, and Nnu Ego all resist by not performing victimhood.

The act of caring intensely for another being in order to sustain life undoubtedly leads to social and political change. This is the charge mothers in many societies have been given. Yet, mothering is continually overlooked as a site for substantive, progressive change for our communities and our world. In its many forms, mothering has served as the lynchpin for societies at their peak and pit of progress. While there is evidence of the act of mothering serving as a beneficial function to many communities around the world, that contribution is often diminished as more practical than powerful. Compounding the role of motherhood with black identity complicates the experience considering the historical and vast mistreatment of black people all over the world. Thus, black motherhood exists as its own identity intersection rife with mischaracterization and endangered by threat of control by the dominant culture.

The four women writers in this project generate four fictional women who subvert the limits of their social positioning through the very structure manufactured to undermine their fundamental value. Despite being relegated to domestic roles that should seemingly disarm their agency, women within these texts resist having their image manipulated by dominant culture and provide an alternative narrative to the image of the black female through their mothering identities. In short, they resist.

This study identifies mothering as a distinct category of the black female experience that exists as a mode of resistance and a model for liberation for black communities. This contributes to the ongoing discourse of black mothering studies that examines the role of mothers in the quest for social freedom in black communities by identifying three distinct categories of black mothering resistance—*mothering the community*, *mothering babies*, and *mothering the stomach*. I have endeavored not only to identify these themes, but also to demonstrate how they are linked and distinct to the black mothering experience. This work privileges how four black women,



two from Nigeria and two from the United States, write about black mothering. There are remarkable moments of transnational intertextuality in the novels of Emecheta, Cary, Bambara, and Adichie that communicate a Pan-African preoccupation in Africana literature that is not as simple as black people relocating to the African continent. These authors create narratives and characters where Africa is present in metaphysical ways in the diasporic attempt to establish and maintain rootedness. The motherland can be seen in how the mother characters redefine the role and rescue themselves and others in their practice of it.

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## VITA

### Education

Georgia State University, Masters of Arts, English  
August 2007-August 2010  
Cumulative GPA, 3.8 (Scale A=4.0)

Spelman College, Bachelor of Arts, English  
Magna Cum Laude  
August 2001-May 2005  
Cumulative GPA, 3.6 (Scale A=4.0)

### Experience

Assistant Professor/Department Chair (Jan 2015-present)  
Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS  
August 2013-Present

Responsibilities include instructing writing and literature courses; creating and administering student writing assignments and exams; responding to and grading student assignments; conferencing individually with students; maintaining student attendance records; providing student tutoring and advisement; creating course master schedules for language and literature courses; constructing recruitment plan for the department; maintaining administrative compliance for the department

Graduate Instructor  
University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS  
August 2011-July 2013

Responsibilities include instructing first-year writing course; creating and administering student writing assignments and exams; responding to and grading student assignments; conferencing individually with students; maintaining student attendance records; providing student tutoring and advisement

Graduate Teaching Assistant  
University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS  
August 2010-Present

Responsibilities include facilitating discussion sessions for students of sophomore-level literature course; administering student exams and in-class writing assignments; responding to and grading student papers, quizzes, exams, and assignments; maintaining student attendance records; providing student tutoring and advisement

Adjunct Instructor  
Atlanta Technical College, Atlanta, GA  
October 2009-June 2010

Responsibilities include creating and delivering lectures and curricula in the areas of English grammar, composition and rhetoric; creating exercises to strengthen student understanding of the subject matter; responding to student assignments; serving on relevant committees; selecting texts; creating tests and writing assignments; and evaluating student performance ; recording and submitting student grades

Guest Lecturer  
Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA  
March 2009

Responsibilities included selecting texts for a world literature survey course; preparing and delivering lectures on Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Mary Wollstonecraft; creating exercises to evaluate student understanding of the subject matter; facilitating discussion of assigned texts and materials.

Institutional Advancement Specialist  
Atlanta Technical College, Atlanta, GA  
February 2007-June 2010

Responsibilities include securing resources from private corporations and organizations as well as individuals; cultivating relationships with corporate and community partners; maintaining and updating donor databases; preparing acknowledgements for contributions to Atlanta Technical College and the ATC Foundation, Inc; serving as staff liaison for Board of Directors; planning and executing all Board and Foundation activities; and securing grants from private organizations to support Foundation efforts; planning the college's major annual fundraising event; administering the student hardship/emergency loan

program; representing the college president and executive vice president in matters of external affairs

**Courses Taught**

English Grammar and Composition  
American Literature  
African Literature  
Professional Writing  
World Literature  
Film & Storytelling

**Interests**

Postcolonial Literature  
African Literature  
Indian Literature  
19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Literature  
Film Studies  
Rhetoric and Composition

**Academic &  
Professional  
Presentations**

“‘Everybody Knows About Mississippi Goddam’: Reconstructing the Narrative of a State to Revive the Soul of a Nation”  
Harvard College—November 2017

“Global Gastronomics: Tales of Exile, Survival, Endurance, and Memory through Food in Postcolonial African and African American Literatures”  
College Language Association Convention—April 2016

“Sew to Speak: Black Women, Quilts, and Justice in the Works of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker”  
Mississippi Department of Archives and History, History is Lunch Session—April 2016

“Promoting Motivation & Diversity in Teaching and Learning”  
Tougaloo College Faculty Institute Panel—January 2016

“Sew to Speak: Quilting as a De-Marginalizing Tool in Works of Eudora Welty and Alice Walker”  
South Atlantic Modern Language Association Convention—  
November 2015

“‘the mule of the world’: Black Feminist Thought in Welty’s ‘A Worn Path’”  
Tougaloo College Research Methods guest lecture—October 2015

**Academic &  
Professional  
Presentations  
(cont.)**

“‘It Takes a Village’: Expanding the Frontier of Teaching and Learning at HBCUs” Roundtable presentation  
College Language Association Convention—April 2015

“Writing the World: Enacting Change through Literature”  
Tougaloo College Humanities Week 2015—March 2015

“‘Crossing a Terrible Line’: Issues of Racial Ventriloquism in White Female Writers of the Global South”  
Mississippi Humanities Council, 2014-2015 Tougaloo College Teacher of the Year—October 2014

“Mothering Interrupted: Witnessing, Understanding, and Telling Apartheid through Motherhood in Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* and *The House Gun*”  
Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement Conference—October 2014

“‘a thing to look at’: Blackness as Spectacle and Performance in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*”  
South Atlantic Modern Language Association Convention—November 2013

“Caught in the Act of Living: Welty as a Voyeur and Witness to Black Life”  
Mississippi Department of Archives and History—June 2013

“Cuisines of Survival: Memory, Identity, and Resistance through Food in Chimimanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”  
South Atlantic Modern Language Association Convention—November 2012

“The Scenery, Spectacle, and Performance of Blackness in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Richard Ford’s *A Piece of My Heart*”  
Southern Writers/Southern Writing Graduate Conference—July 2012

“Those Stories Are Not My South: Re-Translation of Southern Literary Culture and Spaces in Toni Cade Bambara’s ‘*Those Bones Are Not My Child*’”

72<sup>nd</sup> College Language Association Annual Convention—March 2012

“Voodoo Politics: Rhetoric of Projected Non-Western Religious Performance in Accounts of the 1791 Revolt of Saint Domingue”  
21<sup>st</sup> Annual British Commonwealth & PostColonial Studies Conference—February 2012

“Must the Novelist Ask Permission? : Authority and Authenticity of the Black Voice in the works of Eudora Welty and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*”  
Ole Miss English Graduate Colloquium –April 2011

“‘Sugarman done fly away’: Black women’s madness in the wake of male flight in Toni Morrison’s *Love*”  
Toni Morrison Fifth Biennial Conference, Charleston, SC—July 2008

“The Goophered Grapevine” (dramatic reading)  
The Chesnutt Heritage Stamp Commemoration Program—  
February 2008

## Publications

“Demonstration of Life: Signifying for Social Justice in Eudora Welty’s ‘The Demonstrators’.” *New Essays on Welty, Class, and Race*, University Press of Mississippi, 2019.

“The Matter of Black Lives in American Literature: Eudora Welty’s Non-Fiction and Photography.” *Teaching the Works of Eudora Welty: Twenty-first Century Approaches*, University Press of Mississippi, February 2018.

Rev. of *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. Rebecca L. Walkowitz. Columbia UP. College Language Association Journal, 2016.

“Caught in the Act of Living: Welty as a Voyeur and Witness to Black Life”  
*The Eudora Welty Review*, Volume 6, January 2015

“Must the Novelist Ask Permission?: Authority and Authenticity of the Black Voice in the works of Eudora Welty and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*.” *When White Writes Black: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life from*

*Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

“Sugarman done fly away”: Kindred Threads of Female Madness and Male Flight in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Classical Greek Myth”  
Unpublished Master's Thesis/Georgia State University—August 2010

**Professional  
Development &  
Committee  
Involvement**

Tougaloo College General Education Committee  
Co-chair  
Aug 2016-Present

Tougaloo College Academic Affairs Council  
Member  
Aug 2015-May 2017

Tougaloo College Library Advisory Council  
Member  
Aug 2014-May 2015

Tougaloo College Judiciary Council  
Faculty Member  
Aug 2014-May 2015

University of Mississippi English Graduate Student Colloquium  
Chair  
April 2013

Southern Writers/Southern Writing Graduate Conference  
Assistant to the Chair, Panel Moderator  
July 2012

University of Mississippi Center for Writing and Rhetoric (CWR)  
Hiring Committee/Graduate Student Member  
Jan 2011-Aug 2013

University of Mississippi English Graduate Student Board  
Secretary  
August 2011-May 2012

University of Mississippi English Graduate Student Colloquium  
Co-Chair  
April 2012

South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA)  
Flannery O'Connor Society Panel Secretary/Moderator  
Nov 2011/Nov 2012

Southern Writers Southern Writing (SWSW) Conference  
Panel Moderator  
July 2011

**Professional  
Development &  
Committee  
Involvement  
(cont.)**

Atlanta Technical College Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)  
Committee  
Member  
March 2010

**Professional and  
Scholastic Honors  
and Affiliations**

2015 Bharati Mehrotra Excellence in Teaching Award recipient  
2014-2015 Tougaloo College Humanities Teacher of the Year  
2013 Eudora Welty Foundation Research Fellowship recipient  
2012 X.A. Kramer Award for Teaching Excellence recipient  
Modern Language Association  
College Language Association  
Mortar Board National Honor Society  
Sigma Tau Delta National English Honor Society  
National Society of Collegiate Scholars  
National Dean's List, Member  
Alpha Lambda Delta Honor Society  
Georgia State University Graduate English Association  
Association of Fundraising Professionals  
Toni Morrison Society  
The Charles Chestnut Association  
Harvard Business School SVMP participant

**Community  
Activities &  
Memberships**

Mississippi Humanities Council board member  
International Ballet Competition board member  
Foundation for Mississippi History board of directors  
Mississippi Book Festival board of directors  
National Alumnae Association, Spelman College  
National Alumni Association, Georgia State University  
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.  
Malcolm X Grassroots Movement  
Mississippi Human Rights Collective  
Mothers Obtaining Justice and Opportunities, Inc.

