

# Black Women's Mothering in a Historical and Contemporary Perspective *Understanding the Past, Forging the Future*

This essay explores some of the historical and contemporary practices that punish Black women for daring to become mothers. It offers a critical reading of how the construction of the bad Black mother contributes to the realization of 'normal' family life and the 'ideal' nation-state. To this end, I will briefly examine the struggle of the central character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to save her children from the horrors of slavery, and I will consider Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* which focuses on Black women's experiences within states that are determined to control their reproduction. I argue that there are striking similarities between Morrison's historical work and Roberts' current research that illustrate the dangers of mothering then and now. This essay also explores community-based mothering as it contributes to self-actualization and community support among Black women.

My academic and political interests in writing this paper are anchored in disrupting conventional praxis that pathologize Black women in the context of motherhood. I do not write as a Black woman who is a mother. For me, economic constraints, the challenges of student and work life, and the prominence of nuclear family patterns in Canadian society, raise critical questions about the feasibility of motherhood. These questions remain unresolved. Rather, I write as the daughter of a Caribbean woman who, like many other mothers, was forced to leave her children behind to work in Canada. I write as someone who has witnessed this woman's determination to fight for her children's education and general well-being, and I write as the grand-daughter of a man and a woman who raised many of their grand-children because many of *their* own children were pushed to emigrate to find work in the "developed" world. My evolving perspective on motherhood therefore, is informed by the

acts of resistance that Black women engage in to claim their understanding and expression of mothering, the exploitation of Black women's labour by the state through the immigration system and its impact on parent/child relationships, and by the reliance on extended families and other mothers to help raise children. Furthermore, I read these realities in the context of broad historical and economic forces that shape African mothering in the Diaspora through the production of unique yet similarly oppressive experiences.

### **Motherhood and the state: Policing Black women**

It is not a surprise that the struggle for sexual freedom within the western feminist movement in the 1960s did not appeal to African women. The reluctance to join the sexual liberation movement in large numbers cannot be understood without historicizing African women's political agenda: their fight against racism, their desire to strengthen their communities, and the importance of challenging the view that Black people were inherently promiscuous. In addition to founding societies to uplift the Black community, a number of Black women engaged in policing the behaviours of other Black people to ensure that they adhered to proper family values and codes of sexual conduct. The underlying principles governing the creation of the Victoria Reform Benevolent Society for Social Relief is a case in point. Founded in Chatham, Ontario in 1853, the Society was open to all women between sixteen and forty-eight years old, and its services were tied to a vigilant show of proper conduct and morality by the recipients. The Society assisted women who were not addicted to alcohol and who did not engage in multiple relationships (Bristow, 1994: 121). Moreover, article 2 of the bylaws stated that "no member of this society shall be entitled to any relief on account of any disease that she has imprudently brought upon herself" (Bristow, 1994: 121). Women who broke the rules were expelled from the Society.

Similarly, Black women in the United States aspired to dispel the myth of promiscuity and inherent indecency. During the era of Reconstruction, Black women struggled against the barrage of negative images that defined Black womanhood and sexuality (Hooks, 1981), but their attempts to attain some measure of dignity were usually thwarted by white society. Hooks tells us that "everywhere Black women went on public streets, in shops, or at their places at work, they were accosted and subjected to obscene comments and even physical abuse at the hands of white men and women. Those black women suffered most whose behavior exemplified that of a lady" (1981: 55). Black women's articulation of a sexually moral self destabilized white society's views regarding the Black female body as a unit of re/production. That is, the outrage expressed by whites was tied to a fundamental destabilization of the (white) ontological perception of self and personhood as constructed through the subordination of Black womanhood. I submit that these two factors: the subordination of Black female sexuality and reproduction to economic interests, and the construction of these bodies as inherently indecent, continue to

have currency in Euro-American society. This paper is concerned with examining motherhood as a site where the economic and psychosocial interests of the dominant group are articulated through and protected by the state, and where these interests are contested by Black women who undertake motherhood/mothering as an expression of self that is connected to community values and sustainability.

Female sexuality and reproductivity are not free from social and political constraints. Rather, the idealized expression of sexuality, reproduction and motherhood are anchored within the institution of marriage and the nuclear family structure. In order to understand these constraints, it is necessary to consider the meanings ascribed to “woman/women” in processes of nationalism, colonialism and imperialism, for particular meanings have ensured that female bodies are the sites upon which aspirations are mapped and desires are projected. Beyond its articulation of femininity as it is socially constructed and understood, motherhood is tied to the longings of the nation-state. Here I use nation-state to mean the exercise of power that allows a dominant group to control its destiny and realize its goals (Collins, 2000: 229). The creation of family life then, as defined by one's ability to produce children who are connected to a family circle, is a reflection and extension of nationalist aspirations and is therefore subject to state intervention.

The use of the category “woman” shifts in different situations and the term itself is produced in classist, racist, patriarchal and sexualized processes of inequalities (Pierson, 1998; Mohanty, 1991). Pierson (1998) tells us that one may become a woman in opposition to other women in cultures where asymmetric race and class relations are organizing principles. From this perspective, motherhood must be seen as intricately connected to these subordinating processes whereby not all women within a nation are equally encouraged to reproduce. Rather, women who are thought to embody the physical, cultural and mythical ideals of the nation's past, present and future are likely to be rewarded for producing the right type of children, while others are punished for perceived over-reproductivity.

One of the most powerful scenes in Toni Morrison's widely acclaimed novel, *Beloved*, is the central character's determination to kill her four children to save them from slavery. Sethe, the mother, succeeds in killing one child, and is in the process of destroying another when she is stopped. The scene unfolds in a barn wherein:

...two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time.... Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so that her head wouldn't fall off.... (1998: 175)

Set in post-civil war Ohio, the story centres around the dead baby's spirit, *Beloved*, who personifies the evils of slavery and haunts her mother's present as Sethe struggles to throw-off the legacy of slavery. Seeing that the wounded or dead children are of no monetary value to them or the slave economy, the four horsemen sent to re-capture the runaway family, "trotted off leaving the sheriff behind with the damndest bunch of coons they'd ever seen. All testimony to the result of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the animal life they preferred" (Morrison, 1998: 177). Sethe and her children were valuable to the extent that they were useful re/producers in the society.

Black women's reproductive capability continues to be regulated and policed in American society to protect state interests. Over the past decade, an increasing number of poor Black women have been prosecuted for exposing their babies to drugs in the womb. Jennifer Clarise Johnson, a 23-year-old crack addict became the first woman in the United States to be criminally convicted for exposing her baby to crack while pregnant (Roberts, 1997b: 127). The laws are framed under the guise of protecting the fetus from abuse that reduces life chances, but effectively, they are meant to punish Black women who become pregnant, especially if these women are dependent on state welfare.

When a pregnant woman is arrested for harming the fetus by smoking crack, her crime is determined by her decision to have the baby since the woman can avoid prosecution if she has an abortion (Roberts, 1997a: 152). In other words, the "choices" that she faces in front of the judge are: get an abortion, inject Norplant<sup>1</sup> or remain fertile and go to jail. In addition, if a Black woman violates probation by becoming pregnant she will be sent to jail. Roberts asserts that Black women are targeted for such harsh punishment because of the widespread belief that they are not suitable mothers or capable human beings. I would also argue that the legacy of medical experimentation on African bodies lessens concerns about the devastating side-effects of Norplant on many women. Furthermore, the entrenched belief in the idea of the "strong Black women" (Collins, 2000; Beckles, 1995) render state representatives incapable of considering the emotional and spiritual implications of having an abortion for many Black women. What are we to make of the ways in which Black women's reproductive capability is used as described by Morrison and Roberts? And how do their respective works make connections between Black women's reproduction in the slave economy and in the contemporary Diasporic context?

### **Understanding the past to make sense of the present**

If we consider the evolution of imperialist cultures through a continuum of emerging historical patterns of unequal social relations, we can begin to make connections between Black women's reproductive/mothering experiences in slavery and the challenges they face in today. A close look will tell us that not much has changed. Let us consider these arguments in light of the scene from Morrison's *Beloved* (1998) described earlier. Four white men were sent to re-

capture Sethe, a runaway slave and her four children. They found her in a barn in the process of killing her children to save them from the slavery. If we shift our gaze to the men, this powerful scene provides insight into how Euro-American male subjects performed their identity and participated in the economy through the exploitation of Black female sexuality and motherhood.

First, to the four white men, Sethe personified the bad Black mother and exhibited all the characteristics of the animal-like Black woman. That is, Sethe represented everything that the men's white mothers, wives, daughters and sisters were not. Essentially, her body, and the way in which she tried to save her children from slavery allowed the men to imagine home. Sethe's unstable and violent world, created by the slave system which the men helped to sustain, marked the boundary between the slaves' world and the orderly, safe white world suitable for bearing and rearing children in a normal family setting. Second, re-capturing slaves allowed working class white males to participate in the economy by being paid for their services. Indeed, exercising male power through racism and patriarchy offered working class white men some measure of compensation for their exploitation in the ruling nation (Callincos qtd. in McLaren, 1997: 39). Third, the element of an emotional and spiritual sense of privilege that the working class derived from policing others cannot be overlooked. After witnessing Sethe's actions, the men ride off re-affirmed in their belief that it is dangerous to grant slaves freedom because it will inevitably be squandered. This scene reveals that in the slave economy, Black female bodies had symbolic and material uses and meanings that allowed American society to make sense of itself. Moreover, it illustrates how white male subjects articulate their identity by participating violence against Black women. But how does this continue to happen today?

Current state laws that allow judges to sentence pregnant Black women to jail for smoking crack are similar to the laws that allowed Sethe to be tracked down and re-captured.<sup>2</sup> These laws are connected over different historical periods by the common goal of regulating Black female reproduction for the collective good of the white patriarchal capitalist state (see also Augustine, 1997; Williams, 1997). Today, the continued criminalization of Black women results in economic benefits for the law and order industry. This ranges from politicians who build careers by promising tougher laws and larger budgets for the police, judges who build reputations by enforcing these laws, to a burgeoning prison system that is increasingly farmed out to entrepreneurs. Additionally, there is metaphysical value in Black women's bodies in that the meanings attributed to these bodies help to organize the physical and moral borders of white social existence.

The ways in which childbearing Black women are perceived and treated today is illustrative of the connections between the slave economy and the current demands of the capitalist state. In slavery, Black women were coerced into producing children to replenish the slave population, and each child produced added cash value to the owner's human stock. Presently though, in societies that

reduces the person to a unit of consumerism, Black women and their children, especially poor ones, are disposable in the 'new' world economy. This is a reality that contributes to the devaluation of mothering in the African Diaspora.

### **Community-based mothering**

Yet mothering plays a crucial role in communal sustainability and self-empowerment for Black women. To understand the complexities of how this occurs, it is necessary to consider the importance of community in the lives of African people who are severely constrained in imperialist societies. Dei contends that the hostility of the Diaspora "influences the particular options and strategies that are open to those who are minoritized. Understanding the nature of the hostility they encounter is crucial in order not to deny the intellectual agency and power of local subjects and the pragmatic political choices that they make" (2000: 208-209). I read Dei as a challenge to appreciate 'community' as a site of resistance and affirmation with its own tensions and contradictions rather than as a homogenous collective. This understanding of community connotes the need for Africans in the Diaspora to have a foundation for political consciousness/activism, economic support, and a space wherein the self is articulated and affirmed. With this in mind, community-based mothering in the African Diaspora must be looked at through critical lens for a broader understanding of how it is experienced both as a political act and as an expression of a holistic self.

Historically and presently, community mothering practices was and is a central experience in the lives of many Black women and participation in mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression in societies that marginalize Black women. Collins (2000: 11) correctly points out that insightful self-definitions nurtured in suppressed communities, enabled African Black women to use African derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black women. Community mothering is one of the ways in which this was done and is a practice that is evident in the Caribbean experience with which I am familiar.

Between 1973 and 1975, extensive research was conducted with forty-five African Jamaican women to determine the dynamics of conjugal relations in the society's belief system at specific historical periods (Brodber 1986: 23). The women were born from about eighteen sixty-one to nineteen hundred. The study used the testimonies and life histories of the women to develop "a multi-dimensional and dynamic figure of the free woman as she perceived herself to be" as a way of understanding conjugal relations, extended kinship practices, and female independence. The research found that:

... "taking" and "growing" other people's children was normal behaviour for Afro-Jamaican women of the early twentieth century. The children who entered the units in this way were treated as blood relatives and the surrogate parents, despite what emotional attach-

ments might have developed between themselves and their “taken children, were easily able to pass them on to other adults or back to the parents themselves. This act was looked upon as one carried out “through love.” (Brodber, 1986: 26).

All of the women in the sample had reared children at some point whether or not they had given birth to them. The researchers argue that the shifting and changing nature of the relationship between children and caregiver resulted in constant accommodation to subtraction and addition of persons. This experience, they argue, produced individuals with the ability to relate emotionally to a wide range of people in the face of their imminent departure, a characteristic referred to as “emotionally expansive” (Brodber, 1986: 25).

My own childhood unfolded under the guidance of extended family and many other mothers who took responsibility for raising children in the community. Men and women in the community saw themselves as empowered to feed, bathe, and generally care for each other's children without concern for blood-related ties. Both my mother and my aunt who live in Canada have shared many stories about what it meant to grow up in an extended community of other mothers and caregivers. Speaking about the childhood/adolescent years as she and her siblings experienced them, my mother told me that:

*When we were out playing, our parents didn't worry about where we were or if we were being fed. The only thing is that we all had to come home at night ... there was always someone to take care of you, to discipline you ... my brothers got more beatings from people in the community than us girls because we were girls. The teachers in the community were also involved in our lives outside of school, sometimes too much. It was like a small village raising kids, that's how I would describe it.*

In addition to the emotionality of extended mothering and its connection to the development of women-centred community bonds, motherhood/mothering is also a site for community economic survival and political expression among Black women.

Inaccessibility to mainstream institutions of power means that Black women exercise influence and exert power in their everyday lived realities through a series of mothering activities described as motherwork (Collins, 2000: 208-209). Motherwork facilitates the articulation of political consciousness by blood mothers and other mothers in women-centred family networks. For example, Black women use their power in the home, in the church, and in other community-based institutions to foster self-reliance and self-confidence in children.

Motherwork as the impetus for child and community development is evident in the everyday lives of Caribbean women. Caribbean women define themselves primarily through their mothering roles, the development of their

identities on the ability to be good mothers, and putting the spiritual well-being of their children above all else (Barriteau, 196:145). Thus, when children suffer, women experience the worst state of material and psychological stress. Women employ a number of survival strategies to sustain family and community in the face of harsh economic measures in Caribbean societies (Barriteau, 1996; Barrow, 1986; Bolles, 1983; McAfee, 1991). Barriteau (1996, 146-147) refers to the Red Thread Collective of Guyana whereby community members produced textbooks for children during a period of socioeconomic hardship in that country. Moreover, the author describes how middle-class families, although also affected by economic upheaval, continue to support less well off family members in exchange for child-care services. Women-centred strategies stem from the reality that women and children are hardest hit by economic crisis as women are the primary providers and caregivers in most Caribbean households.

The resilient strategies that women use to sustain their children and communities has prompted Barriteau to call for a critical examination of the household as a site of important economic activity with national implications. This approach, Barriteau argues, would “not only move economic modeling closer to socioeconomic reality - that is, to the lived experiences of Caribbean people—but disrupt the hierarchical relation between households and the market behaviour” (1996: 150). Indeed, there are lessons to be learned from the ways in which Black women through motherwork, blood-related or not, continue to support extended family networks and community sustainability.

### Conclusion

Despite historical and contemporary depictions of the bad Black mother to sustain the illusion of normalcy in Euro-American family life, mothering in the African Diaspora is a complex and meaningful experience for many Black women. As such, mothering has to be examined and understood on its own terms and under the circumstances that give rise to how it occurs. Such an approach is a valuable opportunity to look at how mothering results in empowerment and transformation for Black women and their communities.

<sup>1</sup>Surgically injected into the arm, Norplant consists of six silicone capsules each about the size of a matchstick. It prevents pregnancy for up to five years, but the drug causes serious side effects and complications for many women. Once implanted into poor Black women, the laws prevent the removal of Norplant.

<sup>2</sup>The *Fugitive Slave Law*, passed by the United States Congress in 1850 permitted the recapture and return of runaway slaves to their owners.

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