

**Crystal'Aisha PerrymanMark**

# **Resistance and Surrender**

## ***Mothering Young, Black and Feminist***

Some things are about Resistance  
and  
Some things are about Surrender  
Speaking on Revolution  
and God  
Meditating on Fight and Spirit  
Waging battles in  
Mothering and Motherhood  
Each dealing in Sacrifice,  
All about Self-  
Confrontation  
Knowing that too  
Motherhood is a  
birthed institution  
Subverted by my Resistances  
but continued....  
By my Surrender to its conventions.  
—Crystal'Aisha PerrymanMark, 2000

This article focuses on the experiences of resistance I myself have had as a young, Black, teenage mother; as well it explores some informal research I have been collecting on women of similar circumstance and social location mothering within the confines of a racist, sexist, capitalist society. Over the years, I have kept my eyes open and ear to the ground—listening, talking, and trying to understand Black mothering as an identity for myself and others. It has been my experience, and those with whom I have spoken, that we do not fit the

stereotype of the “uneducated, poor, Black, teenage welfare mother” that is often scapegoated by racist ideology that continues to permeate this society. I have discovered that the perpetuation of racist stereotypes, and our acceptance of and resistance to them, are players in the circumstances under which Black women are becoming mothers and choosing motherhood. Dealing with complex and intersecting social identities, Black mothers have had to face a paradox paradigm I have chosen to name “resistance and surrender.” Through reading, hypothesis, observation, and inquiry into my peer group, I have come to find there are many similarities and differences that encompass the perspective of the “Black mother”—both from her own and the “otherized” gaze. With striking duality, feminism and traditionalism are combined to create the assertion that motherhood is our right.

In *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*, Nina Lyon Jenkins (1998) discusses the disparity in research conducted primarily by men, both Black and white, who view Black teenage motherhood as deviant. Jenkins’ counter-analysis of Black motherhood as not deviant, demonstrating that it is possible for us to create new analyses that are grounded in our experience, was one of the many factors that influenced me to delve into the common, yet varied, experience the Black woman/mother shares (1998: 209). I attempt to add to the research conducted by Jenkins in an effort to further broaden the discourse. I believe our voices, both scholarly and personal, add to the plethora we hope to establish, focusing and validating the lives of Black women. I’d like to relate my own experience and that of other women I spoke to, linking their experiences to a larger theme of resistance in a raced, gendered, and economically oppressive society.

I am 21 years old and I had my daughter three years ago when I was 18 and still finishing high school. Though I was encouraged to continue and finish, I felt there was a perception that I would become a “welfare mother” and a “crutch” on society. I believe that Black women are seen by the public on whole as the largest group of (unwed) teenage mothers. Though I have not come across any research to suggest that this may be true, personal experience has afforded me a first-hand perspective of the distinct difference in the motherhood experiences of Black and white women who have not yet reached the age of 19. Drawing from within my community, I saw that there were roughly equal numbers of Black and white teenagers having children. However, I felt there was a stigma attached to being both Black and pregnant, a stigma that carried with it assumptions that Black women were more sexually “free” than white women, and that we would not succeed as far socially, educationally, or economically as our white counterparts.

I was met with obstacles, hostility, and animosity when I pursued post-secondary education after having my child in OAC year. Though there was encouragement from a favourite teacher, many authority figures patronized me with a “you’ll get through it” rhetoric, assuming that I could never be anything other than a highschool graduate. When I was actually admitted to a university



*Crystal/Aisha PerrymanMark and daughter.*

and began attending classes, many of the students and teachers I knew from my highschool couldn't believe it. My motherhood, then, has come not only as a vocation—raising my child as I do with my partner—but also a lifeline, a resistance, an activist work that may not be recognized on a large scale, but one that I do with all my heart, ensuring (in my own small way) that Black mothers are out putting an end to the “assumption of deviance” that, unfortunately, is often internalized by young, Black, and pregnant (single) women. I began talking out, asking questions, and relating my experience to others like me. Determined to resist racist, classist, and sexist ideology that I was not “good enough” because I was Black, poor, and now also a “teenage mother,” I began to see motherhood as triumph of self-discovery and a chance to challenge people and systems in their beliefs.

I spoke informally with seven young mothers whom I personally know, talking about the ways in which their mothering has been a resistance to the conventions of society—and, at times, a surrender. I found there was constant duality. The most reluctant position, but the most forthcoming perspective, was that mothering was an assertion of their womanhood. Mothering, not teenage pregnancy, but the actual raising of children, was an honour to them.



*Crystal'Aisha PerrymanMark, with her partner and daughter.*

It created that bridge from girl to woman and from Black woman as Other to Mother. Becoming a mother puts them in a category where they find themselves and an identity. Whether or not it is chosen, or whether it is a construct of heterosexual hegemony, was left uncertain. There appeared to be a lack of a “sense of entitlement,” as one woman put it, to womanhood and life in general. Becoming mothers thus affirmed their “womanhood.” This was resistance to the confines of racist and sexist society wherein their “womanness” was not viewed on par with that of white women. Implicitly, it was this traditional view of women’s role as mother that empowered Black women into their womanhood as a right. Their assertion harkened to Sojourner Truth’s “A’int I a Woman?”—redefining the ideology of womanhood as commonly defined by white norms of femininity. While this was revolutionary, it was also problematic because such assumptions of womanhood equalling motherhood reverts back to stereotypical notions of what a woman’s role/purpose is in our society. It is an easy trap to fall into. Motherhood, as a societal convention, abounds with essentialism, one where many Black women, teenage or young parents, have found security, respect, and adulthood. I have been there. I loved mothering; I loved the external power rewarded with such a position—a

position itself in constant duality, shifting from celebratory to martyrdom. Our ideological society personifies and accentuates this pedestal construction of motherhood as a woman's supreme task. Many of the Black women I spoke to found their niche as "women" through motherhood.

Despite the many differing ways in which women got pregnant and their particular stances on choice issues—using birth control, not using birth control, pro-choice, anti-abortion—once becoming pregnant, the choice to have children was based on two things. One was a resistance to the idea that young, Black motherhood was "deviant." I myself had wondered why my pregnancy was some grave "social problem" that had more to do with my race than the fact that I was not yet 18. That is when motherhood became political for me.

Race, economics, and sexuality only further complicate and burden the circumstances of women. There is a pathology constructed around the perception of the impoverished Black mother who has no "baby-father" (as they say), and I found by a simple comparison of women's stories that their experiences of mothering were vastly different based on whether or not they had a partner. One woman said,

*All of a sudden, we're the poor Black mother, sucking up off the system—and apparently doing so for years. I don't know what they think but I'm not on welfare, and my parents, and those of all the teen moms I know have always been hard-working people. I am sick of Canada's idea that Blacks are one lump of people they can criminalize anytime something goes wrong.*

Of the seven women I interviewed (eight including myself), I was the only one who, at the time, had a permanent partner who was my child's father. This difference in family composition made my experience of motherhood completely different. Once people were sure Kevin, my partner, was going to stay, that we lived together and had plans for marriage, I was affirmed by my community members, my other parents, and told what a "good girl" I was, that "I was doing the right thing." To many, having a partner meant that I was "legitimized" and somehow "better." The flip-side to this shallow assessment of my ability to succeed based on the presence of a man (my child's father) in my life was that those around me, in this same circumstance but without partners, would end up at the very least working class and/or poor. My best girlfriend was discouraged from even attending post-secondary school and was told that she just wouldn't make it with a child, with no father and no support.

The second resistance came from the women's claim to their right "to mother." Though there are a lot of reasons why young teenage women become pregnant, by the age of 18-20 there is an awareness that comes out of a Black nationalist discourse, as has been discussed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), that Black women feel compelled to have children so that Black people can survive. The idea expressed by all the mothers I interviewed, and upheld by myself at the time, was that we *had* to keep Black children forthcoming. There was a

spiritual sense of doing God's work in the Black community by continuing the legacy.

I have concluded that the Black women's mothering experience is a combination of feminism and Black pride. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has touched on the same issue. With a critical feminist and Black nationalist perspective, the women I interviewed were asserting that a) they could have children and b) under the tyranny of anti-Black racism as a means of survival, it was imperative to do so. It was much more difficult to pry out of the women I spoke to any confirmation that young mothering might have something to do with asserting their heterosexual identity. As for myself confronting sexuality became a non-issue once I became pregnant. It was generally assumed that I was "straight" and this led me to think about the ways in which heterosexism is forced upon the young woman and the young woman mother from both dominant ideological and community cultural codes. When I spoke with the women about how motherhood is synonymous with straight womanhood, many agreed. Despite such agreement, the women I spoke to did not engage my proposal that heterosexism is rampant in our society and that for the Black woman who finds herself in the midst of at least two subject positions—woman and Black—having a child at a young age confirms one's "straightness." This "normalization" process happens to many young girls too young to adequately address fears about her changing sexuality and her varying subject positions. After much discussion, most women were willing to admit that while it was not a factor in their choice, it was certainly a possible circumstance.

The women I interviewed were resistant to the nuclear patriarchal family model. While all of them were either currently employed, or had been at given points since the birth of their child, they all felt that for a woman to stay at home with kids while "daddy" is the main breadwinner is a luxury of the "upperclass." They all felt that the Black woman and her family rarely fit this model. There are a complex arrangements of family models from extended to blended to single in this group of women and these differing family arrangements were all deemed acceptable and necessary for their children to thrive. Toni Morrison has been quoted as saying the problem has not been that teenagers are having babies, because that has always been; what the master narrative is upset about is that they are having these babies without men (qtd. in Moyers, 1990). The affirmation and validation received as a young Black mother with a partner, in contrast to the exile, shame, and ridicule experienced by many of my peers, confirms that the patriarchal role model is opposed to the contemporary experience of many young Black mothers, no doubt because the construct is an idyllic one, framed within a racist, sexist, and homophobic discourse.

Women, despite these obstacles, find themselves networks of support and negotiate (often informal) spaces where they can find agency and continue to negotiate their motherhood and their survival. Despite the fact that they may be impoverished or have little economic means, they have to make sense of their life and their new child's life and put concerns into context. While I do not

believe unplanned pregnancy is the ideal social location in which to have children, as I know the effects from lived experience, I believe that young motherhood needs to be supported. The scholarship and association fostered by organizations such as the Association for Research on Mothering give validity to what I believe is a political concern and a space to engage this notion of “motherhood” and not just the white, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist convention of the nuclear family. I put this work into context with what I have termed my “wholistic feminism,” an inclusive model that reflects the lives of many. There is a need to create a safehouse for young women having children while safely engaging in scholarship that invites them to discover their own agency. Working together, we can find ways to improve their quality of life and our quality of scholarship.

One can see the many complex dimensions and ways in which these findings play out in relation to the notion of “resistance and surrender.” The motherhood experience for young Black women is one of contrasting and fascinating duality. There is resistance to major oppressive ideologies of Blackness, womanhood, and motherhood. At the same time, there is an essentialism conveyed that sees motherhood as a definition of what it means to become a woman in the context of production, gender, and race in a capitalist society. My hope is that I can continue to talk about motherwork as a site for engagement in activism and writing in relation to a wholistic, anti-oppression praxis. I dare to delve into what is relatively an unexplored discourse in feminist mothering praxis, yet is often pathologized by mainstream research. But, as Barbara Smith (1982) has said, “All the Blacks are men, All the Women are White, but Some of us are Brave.” Brave enough to shift paradigms, effect resistances, and choose our destinies. I chose to theorize specifically on Black women and motherhood because it was important to me that my activism reflect my experience. I saw that my life and the lives of others became a basis for theory, one that shifted the paradigm. I recognized the potency, the need, and demand for theory that supports our lives and what bell hooks calls “revolutionary parenting” (1984: 133). To find something that represents one’s circumstance, one must be willing to resist many conventions of society. However, there are also compromises to be made and surrendered. The idea of the privatized, nuclear family is a notion that has existed as normative for far too long at the expense of many other kinds of families. My approach may seem radical, but I view it as lovingly feminist.

To politicize mothering is to give voice to a feeling I have always had, but could scarcely name. A mother interviewed by Fiona Green states that “to Mother is to have an entire generation in one’s hand” (1999: 101). This is a power mothers and othermothers—aunts, friends, grandparents and caregivers—have had, and continue to have, and that is passed down to us.

Being the first in my family to attend secondary school, I feel grateful as many do looking back on the efforts laid down so I could realize my fullest potential. I envision a time where my child(ren) can reap the benefits of the past

as I have. I look at motherwork as a site of activism, information sharing, and community conscious developing. I developed my political eye with this in mind and view my entire feminist politic in this vein of resistance and agency. I believe that motherhood as a life journey is informed by our spiritual, political, and collective consciousness. This “wholism” has been my milk and manna; this motherwork, my integrity.

Kin

My Army  
My Warriors  
Are  
My children

Womb warriors  
Who came to  
Change the Earth

Birthed to Existence  
Resistance  
They will fight

Of my milk and manna  
Breast and Body  
I will teach them  
To resist all conventions  
of  
Silence.  
To have  
No Fear  
& forget the things for which  
I hesitated  
To disregard  
The Fort of Society  
And destroy the embargoes of their freedom

To raise their fists, minds and Spirits in  
protests  
And create R/evolution  
Out of their heart's desire

—Crystal' Aisha PerrymanMark 2000



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