

Poverty and African American Mothers *Countering Biased Ideologies, Representations and the Politics of Containment*

African American mothers living in poverty have long been vilified in mainstream U.S. society: They are often projected as women who do not deserve government assistance or public compassion. In this article, we explore how biased ideologies and representations of African American mothers are a result of racist socioeconomic systems and the feminization and racialization of poverty in the U.S., which all fuel a politics of containment. The politics of containment usually leads privileged citizens to attribute poverty to personal irresponsibility rather than structural conditions. Such pathologizing of African American mothers is a prejudiced response to complex historical, cultural, political and socioeconomic forces. To counter the biased ideologies and representations of African American mothers, we highlight Afronormative research models that analyze African American families within proper historical and sociocultural context. We also note two resistance strategies—shadowboxing and motherwork—that African American mothers have used to combat the ideologies, representations and politics that threaten to keep their families bound in cycles of racism, poverty and social division. We conclude the article by emphasizing how scholars and policymakers can draw upon Afronormative conceptual frameworks and counternarrative data to improve research and public policy regarding African American mothers and families.

You always was a black queen, mama.

I finally understand. For a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man.

You always was committed. A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it?...

I gotta thank the Lord that you made me.... And I appreciate how you raised me....

Everything will be alright if ya hold on.... It's a struggle everyday,

gotta roll on.
And there's no way I can pay you back. But my plan is to show you
that I understand.
You are appreciated.
—Tupac Shakur, U.S. rapper, poet, actor & activist

African American culture and communities have historically held Black mothers in the highest esteem, regardless of socioeconomic status. These maternal figures—be they biological mothers, grandmothers, or fictive kin mothers—are *all* mothers who are highly revered women seen not only as the bearers and nurturers of children, but the bearers of culture, faith and resiliency (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Ladner, 1998; Sudarkasa, 2007). These Afronormative conceptions of mothers, particularly those living in poverty, sharply clash with the ways African American mothers have been represented in mainstream scholarship, social policy, and in society-at-large (Hancock, 2004; Jewell, 1993; Mullings, 1997). Indeed, mainstream representations of African American mothers denote biased ideologies and images that we critique and counter in this article.

Dominant images of African American mothers living in poverty have been shaped by paradoxical belief systems. On one hand, U.S. mass media, research, and public policy often pathologize African American mothers and depict them as poor, lazy, dependent, sexually deviant, and emasculating women who head culturally deficient families (Collins, 1990; Hancock, 2004). Such pathologizing is intensified when African American mothers are assumed to be unmarried, and thus, raising families “out of wedlock.” Biased ideologies and representations of African American mothers (and Black women overall) have been fueled by centuries of systemic racism and they reflect dominant social mores that equate poverty with moral bankruptcy.

On the other hand, racist depictions contrast literature, popular culture, folklore, and some critical research that portray African American mothers as pillars of strength—powerful and loving forces that strive to unify marginalized families against all odds (Boyz II Men, 2001; Collins, 1990; O’Reilly, 2005; James, 1999). All together, the mothering of African American women has been simultaneously exalted and vilified in U.S. society. Stereotypical notions of African American mothers, however, most often influence family research and social policy to the detriment of the African American families they target.

In this article, we explore how biased ideologies and representations of African American mothers are, first, a result of socioeconomic systems that have long oppressed African American families as a whole; and second, a product of the feminization and racialization of poverty in the U.S. (Davis, 1983; Collins, 1990; Hancock, 2004; Jewell, 1993; Mullings, 1997; Sudarkasa, 2007). We explain how racism, sexism and classism combine to worsen a politics of containment that leads privileged citizens to attribute poverty to personal irresponsibility rather than to structural conditions (Collins “Fighting

Words”; Hancock). We also explore how such biased attribution is reflected in public policy.

To counter the biased ideologies and representations of African American mothers, we highlight Afronormative research models that analyze African American families within proper historical and sociocultural context (Cooper, 2007; Sudarkasa, 2007). We note two resistance strategies—shadowboxing and motherwork—that African American mothers use to combat the ideologies, representations and politics that threaten to keep their families bound in cycles of racism, poverty and social division. We conclude the article by emphasizing how scholars and policymakers can draw upon Afronormative conceptual frameworks and counternarrative data to improve research and public policy regarding African American mothers and families.

U.S. poverty, African American families, and the politics of containment

The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world, however, over 17 percent of U.S. children live in poverty, and Black (mostly African American) children comprise the largest racial-ethnic group of poor children (Children’s Defense Fund). Half of Black children are born into poverty. The Children’s Defense Fund, one of the nation’s largest non-profit/non-partisan children’s advocacy organizations, further reports that Black children are four times as likely as White children to live in extreme poverty. In addition, 56 percent of Black children are raised in single-parent families usually lead by mothers, and families lead by single mothers are nearly six times as likely to be poor compared to families lead by two parents (Children’s Defense Fund).

The poverty many black families face is greatly influenced by a host of systemic issues like inadequate public education, escalated unemployment rates, and the lack of affordable housing in the U.S. Still, African American families are pathologized in U.S. society. Single African American mothers, as the “head of household,” are particularly blamed for many of the challenges their families incur even when the structural inequality that has evolved over centuries in the U.S. contribute to families’ lingering challenges (Hancock; Jewell; Mullings; Sudarkasa).

The politics of blaming poor, African American mothers for their family’s poverty is linked to what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the new politics of containment”—a political phenomenon that depoliticizes women’s oppression, dissuades their resistance, and helps contain them at the bottom of U.S. socioeconomic and political hierarchies despite other indicators of racial progress (1998: 11).

Collins explains that segregation and surveillance are two tactics that dominant, White society has historically used to oppress African Americans and exclude them from power and full citizenship. Until the mid-twentieth century, such tactics were mandated and enforced by law. Since the 1950s, African Americans have made tremendous social and political gains as a result of civil rights activism and hard fought legal victories; yet, full legal citizen-

ship has not always come with substantive citizenship—meaning the ability to fully participate and access American sociopolitical systems. She further argues that racial segregation and surveillance mechanisms still persist in U.S. society and they target Black women, but in a less explicit way compared to decades ago. Segregation and surveillance are now informally imposed rather than legally sanctioned.

Structural conditions and racial discrimination still segregate many African Americans by limiting them to public spaces, such as public housing, public schools and public welfare programs at a time when public spaces are increasingly devalued in the U.S. because they are associated with poor people (Apple, 2007; Collins, 1998). To the contrary, privatization, market forces, and private spaces, such as private schools and private hospitals, are preferred. Of course access to the U.S. private sphere requires power, fiscal resources, and social networks that women living in poverty lack.

Whereas segregation laws sought to keep African American mothers at the bottom of socioeconomic and political ladders, Collins suggests that “this new politics of containment relies much more heavily on surveillance tactics that fix [and monitor] Black women in the public eye” through the development and maintenance of stereotypical, “controlling images” (1998: 35; 1990: 67). Similarly, Ange-Marie Hancock suggests that historical controlling images such as “Jezebel and Mammy” have been replaced by “more nuanced controlling images of African American women as ‘immoral women and welfare queens’” (2004: 26). Despite the evolution of these terms the politics of containment continue to perpetuate a myth that poverty is personally induced rather than a result of structural and political realities. Critical theorists further maintain that these controlling images not only propagate racist ideologies and oppressive political systems, but also reinforce the same dehumanizing perceptions of African American women that partly structure U.S. society.

The legacy of U.S. slavery and its pathologizing ideologies

The roots of many of the ideologies that still pathologize African American mothers and families stem back to slavery. U.S. slavery represents the starting point of African American family formation. Slave traders brought Africans to the U.S. in the 1600s and compelled African slaves to forge a cultural family model that infused old, African traditions with a new, U.S. family structure that adapted to unthinkable social conditions.

Slavery positioned all members of African American families as property wholly dependent on White slaveholders for their survival. It constructed a race-based social hierarchy steeped in a sophisticated ideology that taught the racial superiority of White individuals and the inferiority of Black individuals. Slavery socially and legally dehumanized African Americans altogether. Moreover, laws under slavery illegalized the marriage and literacy of African American slaves while permitting slave masters the right to separate and sell family members (both adults and children) to other slaveholders for economic profit. The selling

and splitting of African American families was also a strategy White slaveholders used to demoralize slaves and hinder their motivations to organize, rebel, and escape imprisonment (Davis, 1983). Slavery, therefore, was the original system of containment to which African Americans were subjected.

Slavery ushered in various social and political eras in which dominant White society developed racist ideologies of African American women and mothers (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; James, 1999). These ideologies capitalized on the intersectionality of African American women's oppression and their racial, class-based, and gendered identities to depict them as pathological and thus justify their domination. For almost 250 years, African American women were slaves confined as property, workers and sex objects for the economic gain and physical exploitation of White men (and U.S. society). They fought to exert sovereignty over their minds, bodies and children. Therefore, their survival, self care and mothering were acts of individual and collective resistance (Collins, 1990, 1994; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; James, 1999).

As Angela Davis (1983) explains, African American women were systematically denied their womanhood under slavery. Slave women were also consistently subjected to rape, yet vilified as hypersexual creatures in order to objectify and blame them for their victimization. In addition, slave women's children were systematically stolen from them and sold into bondage. These mothers, however, were forced to dotingly rear the children of their White masters. All of these practices crystallized African American women's roles as slave breeders and mummies in society; they deprived them from being respected as women or honored as mothers (Cooper, forthcoming; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; James, 1999; Mullings, 1997).

The U.S. government began granting African American slaves freedom in 1863, yet it was impossible for many freed slaves to find and reunite with their biological relatives who had been sold off. Consequently, former slaves created family with non-biological kin without any economic support or government restitution. Socially constructing family became a form of community building and social support—an approach that predated slavery, yet one that became paramount to African Americans' collective survival given slavery's attempt to desecrate their biological family structures (Billingsley, 1992; Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; James, 1999). Families led by single mothers emerged as one of the many necessary and acceptable family forms among African Americans.

Today, single African American mothers are still commonly recognized for their strength, resourcefulness, and leadership within African American communities (Sudarkasa, 2007). The vestiges of slavery's oppression, however, have helped sustain dominant ideologies that associate the feminine, loving, nurturing, and "good" mother ideal with white women and assign demeaning, "bad" mother stereotypes to African American women (Collins, 1990; Cooper, 2009; James, 1999). These stereotypes and controlling images, like those that portray African American mothers as "welfare queens," provoke many to blame poor African American mothers and their families for their socioeconomic

conditions. Furthermore, the failure of researchers, policymakers, educators, and social service professionals to view African American mothers and families through a contextualized lens has perpetuated divisive social relations and policies that fuel a politics of containment.

Economizing the value of African American families

One of the strongest influencers of African American family research and policy has been Anglocentric paradigms that exalt nuclear, patriarchal and marriage-based families—families with children living in a singular household with two heterosexual parents, “headed” by the father. The “head of household” concept connotes the family as an isolated, economic, managerial, and structural-functional institution. Explanations of how much African American families deviate from this norm, which are prevalent in U.S. family research and policy, frame African American families as morally and culturally deficient. Moreover, policymakers typically represent single, African American mothers who lead their families as lazy, financially dependent women who are “married to the state” in order to receive public welfare assistance rather than to men (Collins, 1998: 35; Hancock, 2004).

The policy discourse surrounding African American families, overall, economizes their value—reducing their cultural variations, strengths and resiliencies to dollar amounts that the U.S. government reluctantly distributes through family welfare programs aimed at “fixing” African American families. Pathologizing ideologies and representations of African American families are apparent when considering welfare policy’s biased language and assumptions, its distorted intentions, and its harsh consequences. Single, African American mothers living in poverty are especially targeted by such discourse.

Traditionally, family welfare policies have pointed to the lower rates of marriage among African Americans compared to whites and they have noted the disproportionate amount of “female-headed households” and “out-of-wedlock births” among African Americans (Hill, 2007; Jewell, 1993; Mullings, 1997; U.S. Department of Labor, 1965). At the heart of these assessments is the assumption that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society” (PRWORA, sec. 101). This is the first “finding” stated in the U.S. *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA) of 1996—a law that guides the nation’s welfare regulations.

Terms like “female-headed households” and “out-of-wedlock births” are widely used in family welfare policy. The female-headed household term is especially stigmatizing when it is applied to African American women. It is a term that gained social legitimacy and wide-scale acceptance in the U.S. in 1965 when it was repeatedly used in a U.S. Department of Labor (1965) report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*—commonly referred to as *The Moynihan Report*.¹ The report asserted that female-headed households were “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society...” (Chapter 2, line/par. 1). This claim was presented without sufficient sociocultural

context, as were similar findings regarding the rates of poverty, incarceration and unemployment among African Americans. *The Moynihan Report* further claimed that the African American family's "matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole" (Chapter 4, lines 1,2/par. 3).

Decades after *The Moynihan Report*, Hancock explains that its biased language and assumptions are still central to the social and political discourse surrounding single, African American mothers living in poverty. For instance, language from PRWORA states that, "marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interest of children." This statement implies that any non marriage-based family is inadequate for healthy child development. As a result, African American families (and all others) that do not conform to this norm are characterized as economic burdens to society (Jewell, 1993; Mullings, 1997). The largest population of U.S. welfare beneficiaries, however, are White families. Still, discussions of U.S. poverty, welfare and female-headed households are racialized (Jewell, 1993; Mullings, 1997), just as family poverty issues are feminized. Moreover, as the title of the U.S. welfare policy indicates, the uplift of U.S. families living in poverty is designated as the "personal responsibility" of parents rather than a significant government/public concern.

While all parents should be held accountable for being loving, nurturing and for providing for their children, poverty is a societal problem partly caused by systemic conditions. Poverty remedies, therefore, must address systemic inequality not personal decision-making alone. Indeed, the Children's Defense Fund (2007) determined that, "Child poverty could be eliminated for \$ 55 billion a year and could be paid for by the tax cuts currently received by the top one percent of (U.S.) taxpayers" (5). So, the poverty of African American mothers and families will likely persist until all of U.S. society is vested in eradicating the nation's poverty and family welfare policy is not limited to individualistic programs and allegations of personal blame.

Embracing Afronormative perspectives in research and policy

Biased ideologies, representations and policies targeting African American mothers and families in effect maintain oppressive politics of containment. Anglocentric conceptualizations of the African American families inform both biased policies and research. *Afronormative* perspectives, in contrast, have emphasized the strengths of African American mothers and families.

Afronormative perspectives include Afrocentric frameworks along with some critical race, Black feminist and womanist frameworks (Collins, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Cooper "Parent Involvement;" Cooper, 2009; Sudarkasa, 2007). Afronormative perspectives have contributed epistemologies that offer distinct conceptualizations of family constructs that are more complex, holistic, culturally relevant, and humane than many of those coming from Anglocentric paradigms. Afronormative perspectives do not exalt the value, organization

and function of any ethnic group over another; hence, they do not rely on the oppositional dichotomies of good us/bad others that fuel bigotry and separatist politics. They, instead, draw upon critical sociopolitical analyses and cultural norms of the African Diaspora to theorize about those who are from the African Diaspora—analyses and norms that are diverse not monolithic. In doing so, Afronormative perspectives assert important counternarratives, meaning theories and empirical accounts of lived experiences that offer insight into the reality, victories and challenges of marginalized people that typically contradict dominant, cultural scripts that pathologize such people (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Afronormative perspectives also grapple with issues typically ignored by other scholarly traditions and they emphasize—thereby legitimizing—the standpoint of African peoples. Scholarship informed by Afronormative perspectives stand to benefit social thought, research, policy and society at large.

For instance, Niara Sudarkasa (2007) highlights several characteristics of families headed by single African American mothers that researchers and policymakers should consider. She further conceptualizes the African American family as a sociocultural institution that is enduring, communal, kinship-based, and; nested within, and affected by, micro, meso and macro systems. She stresses that “marital stability” is not synonymous with “family stability.” She also deconstructs hegemonic beliefs that the married, two-parent family configuration is the only healthy, nurturing family structure (173). Similarly, Sudarkasa explains that women can be primary economic providers, cultural leaders, and thus “heads of household” in either a single or two parent family, but neither scenario mean they function or lead alone. She stresses the importance of recognizing that families headed by single mothers are not homogenous in either form or function. The scholar further combats “the notion that female-headed households are the main cause of the poverty, crime, and hopelessness found among some Blacks [e.g. African Americans]...” (173).

Afronormative analyses, such those provided by Sudarkasa, also consider Black women’s political resistance to poverty and other forms of oppression. They highlight the tradition of Black women feeling a sense of personal accountability for their life and the conditions and status of their families and communities (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Ladner, 1998; James, 1999; Mullings, 1997). Feeling accountable for improving one’s life is not the same as feeling wholly responsible for one’s oppression. Historically, Black women have recognized that both personal decision-making and structural conditions influence an adult’s socioeconomic status (Collins, 1990; James, 1999). Shadowboxing and motherwork are just two resistance strategies that African American women have used to combat poverty and better their families (James, 1999; Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2007).

Shadowboxing is the act of African American women negotiating complex identities as they interface with society and oppose interlocking forms racial, class, and gender oppression. James explains that many African American women simultaneously serve as soldiers who must conform and adapt to

sociocultural norms of mainstream society while also rebelling as warriors to liberate themselves, their families, and their communities. These women's marginal location in mainstream society compels them to box in the shadows of dominant powerholders' view; thus, exerting resistance despite others' attempts to monitor and regulate them. Indeed, this is the type of resistance that powerholders do not want to validate or see because it challenges the dominant social structure that keep privileged Whites so disproportionately empowered. Joy James (1999) explains:

Shadow boxers are fighters who battle as outsiders, at times criminalized as cultural and political outlaws. Sometimes they are defeated by themselves or the society and state of which they are a part. Sometimes they are victorious until the next battle. Privately they box with themselves, their kin, and sometimes imaginary opponents. Publicly, their conflicts engage the state's destructive policies. (176)

Scholars note a plethora prominent shadowboxing women like civil rights leaders Ella Baker and more contemporary figures like Faye Wattleton, the former executive director of Planned Parenthood who is an ardent advocate for U.S. women's reproductive rights (hooks, 1981; James, 1999; Payne, 1995). Shadowboxing can also be part of the average African American woman's resistance. For instance, shadow boxers can be African American mothers living in poverty who comply with state policies in order to receive welfare assistance, yet also participate in community organizing events geared to improve public housing. Such mothers build social networks from which they and others can benefit as they strive to empower themselves to live better lives. Shadow boxing is particularly evident when considering African American women's motherwork.

The motherwork of women of color has been described as being part of a resistance tradition that reflects the women's distinct concerns about raising their children to have a sense of personal and cultural pride and negotiate inequitable socioeconomic and political systems so they can prosper. (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). Given African American's specific history in the U.S., the efforts of African American mothers to nurture their children's self-esteem and dignity is an essential part of helping them develop the strength and skills to survive and flourish in a racist society.

Camille Wilson Cooper (2007) draws upon her empirical study of parents' school choice-making to explain how African American mothers struggle and sacrifice to perform motherwork in public schools. She marshals data from African American mothers to challenge educators' biased views that assume low-income and working class African American mothers do not adequately care or involve themselves in their children's education. Cooper, instead, explains how mothers advocate for their children and enact resistance to combat educational policies and practices that are influenced by containment politics.

Conclusion

The politics of containment in the U.S. project African American mothers as the “undeserving” poor—women who are not worthy of government assistance or public compassion (Hancock, 2004; Mullings, 1997; Jewell, 1993). This pathologizing of African American mothers is a biased response to complex historical, cultural, political and socioeconomic forces. In contrast, Afronormative scholarship examines African American mothers and families within cultural context.

Concepts such as shadowboxing and motherwork suggest how African American mothers have worked to navigate complex sociopolitical systems, resist oppressive forces and build better lives. These theoretical concepts, along with critical, strength-based analyses of African American families, suggest the value of developing research and policy that is informed by Afronormative perspectives. Such perspectives implicitly challenge one to interrogate, revisit, and deepen their understanding of culture, femininity, masculinity, marriage, and family. It also calls upon one to reject pathologizing conceptual frameworks and denounce the cycles of racism, poverty, and social division that hurt us all.

¹The report’s colloquial name is linked to its lead author/investigator Daniel P. Moynihan, a former U.S. Senator.

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