

chapter one

A Politics of the Heart

Toni Morrison's Theory of Motherhood as a Site of Power and Motherwork as Concerned with the Empowerment of Children

MOTHERHOOD IS A CENTRAL THEME in Morrison's fiction and is a topic she returns to time and time again in her many interviews and articles. In her reflections on motherhood, both inside and outside her fiction, Morrison articulates a fully developed theory of African American mothering that is central to her larger political and philosophical stance on black womanhood. Building upon black women's experiences of, and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture. Morrison defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women. From this position of power black mothers engage in a maternal practice that has as its explicit goal the empowerment of children. This chapter will introduce Morrison's theory of motherhood, what I have termed "A Politics of the Heart." Drawing upon Patricia Hill Collins's standpoint theory, I will detail how the traditions and practices of black mothering give rise to a distinct black maternal perspective on motherhood. The chapter will then examine how Morrison, building from this standpoint on black motherhood, defines black motherhood as a site of power for women. Next, borrowing from Sara Ruddick's model of maternal practice, I will explore how and in which ways Morrison defines motherwork as a political enterprise that assumes as its central aim the empowerment of children. Motherwork, in Morrison, is concerned with how mothers, raising black children in a racist and sexist world, can best protect their children, instruct them in how to protect themselves, challenge racism, and, for daughters, the sexism that seeks to harm them.

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS'S STANDPOINT THEORY

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “[E]very culture has a worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences” (10). Black women, Collins goes on to explain,

fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all, Black women’s grounding in traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive African American women’s culture. (11)

The black female standpoint develops in opposition to and in resistance against the dominant view or what Collins calls the controlling images of black womanhood. Collins argues that “the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (71). The four controlling images that Collins examines include the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel. By way of controlling images, as Collins explains, “certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and [then] used to justify [that] oppression” (7). “From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery,” Collins writes, “to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression” (7). Black women, according to Collins, may resist these derogatory stereotypes through the creation of a distinct black female standpoint that is based on black women’s own experiences and meanings of womanhood.

The black female standpoint, Collins argues, develops through an interplay between two discourses of knowledge: “the commonplace taken-for granted knowledge” and the “everyday ideas” of black women that are clarified and rearticulated by black women intellectuals or theorists to form a specialized black feminist thought. In turn, as Collins explains, “the consciousness of Black women may be transformed by [this] thought” (20). She elaborates:

Through the process of rearticulation, Black women intellectuals offer African-American women a different view of themselves and their world from that forwarded by the dominant group. . . . By taking the core themes of a Black women’s standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black women intellectuals can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black’s women’s everyday, taken-for granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms and rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More, important, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance. (31–32)

In other words, the black female standpoint, emerging from black women's everyday experiences and clarified by black feminist theory, not only provides a distinct "angle of vision on self, community and society" but also, in so doing, enables black women to counter and interrupt the dominant discourse of black womanhood.

The formation and articulation of a self-defined standpoint, Collins emphasizes, "is [thus] key to Black women's survival" (26). As Audre Lorde argues, "[I]t is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (as quoted in Collins, 21, 1991). However, as Collins emphasizes the importance of self-definition, she recognizes that black women, as an oppressed group, inevitably must struggle to convey this self-definition, positioned as they are at the periphery of the dominant white, male culture. Collins writes: "An oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult" (26). The black female standpoint is thus, in Collins's words, "an independent, viable, yet subjugated knowledge" (13).

Collins's standpoint thesis provides a useful conceptual framework for viewing Morrison as a maternal theorist. To borrow from Collins's paradigm: Morrison is an intellectual who takes the core themes of black motherhood and develops from them a new consciousness of black motherhood that empowers African American women and engenders resistance. Furthermore, Morrison's standpoint on black motherhood challenges, and enables black women to challenge the controlling images of black motherhood, which Collins has defined as the mammy, the matriarch, Jezebel, and the welfare mother. Morrison's standpoint on black motherhood enables black women to resist these negative evaluations of black motherhood by rearticulating the power that is inherent in black women's everyday experiences of motherhood. This rearticulation centers upon a reaffirmation of the traditional roles and beliefs of black motherhood that gives rise to Morrison's theory of motherhood as a site of power for black women and her theory of motherwork as an enterprise concerned with the empowerment of children. The following section will explore "the commonplace taken-for granted knowledge" and "everyday ideas" of black motherhood from which Morrison develops her theory of motherhood as a "politics of the heart."

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMANIST THOUGHT ON MOTHERHOOD

"During the early stages of contemporary women's liberation movement," bell hooks writes, "feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants" (1984: 133). "Some white, middle class, college educated women argued," hooks continues, that motherhood was:

the locus of women's oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education . . . would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood. (1984: 133)

Feminist theory on motherhood, as hooks identifies, is racially codified. Drawing upon contemporary womanist¹ thought on black motherhood, I will argue that there exists a distinct African American tradition of motherhood. Two inter-related themes or perspectives distinguish the African American tradition of motherhood. First, mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to African American culture. Secondly, it is recognized that mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture. Black women raise children in a society that is at best indifferent to the needs of black children and the concerns of black mothers. The focus of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete. For the purpose of this discussion, I employ African Canadian theorists Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard's definition of empowerment: "empowerment is naming, analyzing, and challenging oppression on an individual, collective, and/or structural level. Empowerment, which occurs through the development of critical consciousness, is gaining control, exercising choices, and engaging in collective social action" (46). To fulfill the task of empowering children, mothers must hold power in African American culture, and mothering likewise must be valued and supported. In turn, African American culture, understanding the importance of mothering for individual and cultural well-being and empowerment, gives power to mothers and prominence to the work of mothering. In other words, black mothers require power to do the important work of mothering and are accorded power because of the importance of mothering.

The African American tradition of motherhood centers upon the recognition that mothering, in its concern with the physical and psychological well-being of children and its focus upon the empowerment of children, has cultural and political import, value, and prominence, and that motherhood, as a consequence, is a site of power for black women. This section will examine this tradition of African American mothering under five interrelated topics: "Othermothering and Community Mothering," "Motherhood as Social Activism and as a Site of Power," "Matrifocality," "Nurturance as Resistance: Providing a Homeplace," and "The Motherline: Mothers as Cultural Bearers." Next it will examine this tradition in the context of mothers' relationships with their children. Specifically, this section will consider how daughters seek identification or connection with their mothers due to the cultural centrality and significance of the mother role and how this connection gives rise to the daughters' empowerment in African American culture. Finally, the section will explore how African American

mothers remain, contrary to the normative scripts of mother-son relation, involved in their sons' lives and how this involvement fosters physical survival, psychological well-being, and overall empowerment.

OTHERMOTHERING AND COMMUNITY MOTHERING

Stanlie James, in "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformations" defines othermothering "as acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (45). Othermothers usually care for children. In contrast, community mothers, as Njoki Nathani Wane explains, "take care of the community. These women are typically past their childbearing years" (112). "The role of community mothers," as Arlene Edwards notes, "often evolved from that of being othermothers" (88). James argues that othermothering and community mothering developed from, in Arlene Edwards's words, "West African practices of communal lifestyles and interdependence of communities" (88). Consequently, as Patricia Hill Collins has observed, "[m]othering [in West Africa] was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men" (1993: 45). Rather, mothering expressed itself as both nurturance and work, and care of children was viewed as the duty of the larger community. Collins argues that these complementary dimensions of mothering and the practice of communal mothering/othermothering give women great influence and status in West African societies. She elaborates:

First, since they are not dependent on males for economic support and provide much of their own and their children's economic support, women are structurally central to families. Second, the image of the mother is culturally elaborated and valued across diverse West African societies. . . . Finally, while the biological mother-child bond is valued, childcare was a collective responsibility, a situation fostering cooperative, age-stratified, woman centered "mothering" networks. (45)

These West African cultural practices, Collins argues, were retained by enslaved African Americans and gave rise to a distinct tradition of African American motherhood in which the custom of othermothering and community mothering was emphasized and elaborated. Arlene Edwards, in her article "Community Mothering: The Relationship Between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women," explains:

The experience of slavery saw the translation of othermothering to new settings, since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women in addition to the field or house duties. . . . [T]he familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, had been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering. The

survival of the concept is inherent to the survival of Black people as a whole . . . since it allowed for the provision of care to extended family and non blood relations. (80)

The practice of othermothering remains central to the African American tradition of motherhood and is regarded as essential for the survival of black people. Bell hooks, in her article "Revolutionary Parenting" (1984), comments:

Child care is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearsers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearsers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based child care. Black women who had to leave the home and work to help provide for families could not afford to send children to day care centers and such centers did not always exist. They relied on people in their communities to help. Even in families where the mother stayed home, she could also rely on people in the community to help. . . . People who did not have children often took responsibility for sharing in childrearing. (144)

"The centrality of women in African-American extended families," as Nina Jenkins concludes in "Black Women and the Meaning of Motherhood," "is well known" (Abbey and O'Reilly 1998: 206).

The practice of othermothering, as it developed from West African traditions, became in African American culture a strategy of survival in that it ensured that all children, regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, would receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical well-being and makes empowerment possible. Collins concludes:

Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "othermothers," women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (1993: 47)

Community mothering and othermothering also emerged in response to black mothers' needs and served to empower black women and enrich their lives. "Historically and presently community mothering practices," Erica Lawson writes, "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" (26). The self-defined and created role and identity of community mother also, as Lawson explains, "enabled African Black women to use African derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black women" (26).

The practice of othermothering/community mothering as a cultural sustaining mechanism and as a mode of empowerment for black mothers has been documented in numerous studies. Carol Stack's early but important book *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (1974) emphasizes how crucial and central extended kin and community are for poor urban blacks. "Black families in The Flats and the non-kin they regard as kin," Stack writes in her conclusion, "have evolved patterns of co-residence, kinship-based exchange networks linking multiple domestic units, elastic household boundaries, lifelong bonds to three-generation households, social controls against the formation of marriages that could endanger the network of kin, the domestic authority of women, and limitations on the role of the husband or male friend within a woman's kin network" (124).² Priscilla Gibson's recent article, "Developmental Mothering in an African American Community: From Grandmothers to New Mothers Again" (2000), provides a study of grandmothers and great-grandmothers who assumed the caregiving responsibilities of their (great) grandchildren as a result of the parent being unable or unwilling to provide that care. Gibson argues that "[in]creasingly grandmothers, especially African American grandmothers, are becoming kinship providers for grandchildren with absent parents. This absent middle generation occurs because of social problems such as drug abuse, incarceration, domestic violence, and divorce, just to name a few" (33). In "Reflections on the Mutuality of Mothering: Women, Children, and Othermothering," Njoki Nathani Wane explores in her research study of women in Kenya how precolonial African beliefs and customs gave rise to a communal practice of childrearing and an understanding that "parenting, especially mothering, was an integral component of African traditions and cultures" (111). "Most of pre-colonial Africa," explains Wane, "was founded upon and sustained by collectivism. . . . Labour was organized along parallel rather than hierarchical lines, thus giving equal value to male and female labour. Social organization was based on the principle of patrilineal or matrilineal descent, or a combination of both. Mothering practices were organized as a collective activity" (108). Today, the practice of othermothering, as Wane notes, "serves[s] to relieve some of the stresses that can develop between children and parents [and] provides multiple role models for children; [as well] it keeps the traditional African value systems of communal sharing and ownership alive" (113). Othermothering and community mothering, Wane concludes, "can be understood as a form of cultural work or as one way communities organize to nurture both themselves and future generations" (113).

MOTHERHOOD AS SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND AS A SITE OF POWER

The practices of othermothering and in particular community mothering serve, as Stanlie James argues, "as an important Black feminist link to the development of new models of social transformation" (45). Black women's role of community mothers, as Collins explains, redefines motherhood as social activism:

Black women's experiences as other mothers have provided a foundation for Black women's social activism. Black women's feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children. (49)

In *Black Feminist Thought* Collins develops this idea further:

Such power is transformative in that Black women's relationships with children and other vulnerable community members is not intended to dominate or control. Rather, its purpose is to bring people along, to—in the words of late-nineteenth-century Black feminists—“uplift the race” so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (132)

Various and diverse forms of social activism stem from and are sustained by the African American custom of community mothering. Community mothering, as Arlene Edwards explores it in her article “Community Mothering: The Relationship Between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women,” has been expressed in activities and movements as varied as the Black Clubwomen and Civil Rights movements and black women's work in the church. Drawing upon the research of Gilkes, Edwards elaborates: “In reporting on Black community workers, Gilkes found that these women often ‘viewed the Black Community as a group of relatives and other friends whose interest should be advanced, and promoted at all times, under all conditions, and by almost any means’” (88). Bernard and Bernard theorize black women's work as educators as a form of social activism. “Education,” they argue, “is considered a cornerstone of Black community development, and as such Black women, as community othermothers, have placed a high value on education and have used it as a site for activism” (68). Academic mothers, they continue, “also value education, and use their location to facilitate the education of others. [As well] academic othermothers who operate within an Africentric framework, are change agents who promote student empowerment and transformation” (68). They go on to elaborate:

Collins' definition of othermothers extends to the work we do in the academy. Othermothering in the community is the foundation of what Collins calls the “*mothering the mind*” relationships that often developed between African American women teachers and their Black female and male students. We refer to this as mothering in the academy, and see it as work that extends beyond traditional definitions of mentorship. It is a sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, a spiritual connectedness that epitomizes the Africentric values of sharing, caring and accountability. (68)

Collins argues that this construction of mothering as social activism empowers black women because motherhood operates, in her words, as “a symbol of power.” “A substantial portion of Black women's status in African-Amer-

ican communities,” writes Collins, “stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contributions as community othermothers to Black community development as well” (51). “More than a personal act,” write Bernard and Bernard (1998), “Black motherhood is very political. Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the ‘guardians of the generations.’ Black mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values to their children, and the children in their communities” (47). Black motherhood, as Jenkins concluded, “is a site where [black women] can develop a belief in their own empowerment. Black women can see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, for acquiring status in the Black community and as a catalyst for social activism” (Abbey and O’Reilly 1998: 206).

MATRIFOCALITY

The African American model/practice of mothering, according to Patricia Hill Collins, differs from Eurocentric ideology in three important ways:

First, the assumption that mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for child-rearing is less applicable to Black families. While the ideal of the cult of true womanhood has been held up to Black women for emulation, racial oppression has denied Black families sufficient resources to support private, nuclear family households. Second, strict sex-role segregation, with separate male and female spheres of influence within the family, has been less commonly found in African-American families than in White middle-class ones. Finally, the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a “good” mother one must stay at home, making motherhood a full-time “occupation,” is similarly uncharacteristic of African-American families. (1993: 43–44)

Miriam Johnson in *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives* (1990) argues that the wife role and not the mother’s role occasions women’s secondary status in a patriarchal culture. In contrast, matrifocal cultures, such as African American culture, according to Johnson, emphasize women’s mothering and are characterized by greater gender equality.³ In matrifocal societies, Johnson writes, “women play roles of cultural and social significance and define themselves less as wives than as mothers” (226). “Matrifocality,” Johnson continues,

however, does not refer to domestic maternal dominance so much as it does to the relative cultural prestige of the image of mother, a role that is culturally elaborated and valued. Mothers are also structurally central in that mother as a status “has some degree of control over the kin unit’s economic resources and is critically involved in kin-related decision making processes.” . . . It is not the absence of males (males may be quite present)

but the centrality of women as mothers and sisters that makes a society matrifocal, and this matrifocal emphasis is accompanied by a minimum of differentiation between women and men. (226)

The wife identity, according to Collins, is less prevalent in African American culture because women assume an economic role and experience gender equality in the family unit. She writes:

African-American women have long integrated their activities as economic providers into their mothering relationships. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood, in which work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood. (1993: 48)

“Whether they wanted to or not,” Collins continues, “the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female ‘occupation’” (49). Thus, black women, at least among the urban poor, do not assume the wife role that Johnson identified as that which structures women’s oppression. Moreover, in African American culture motherhood, not marriage, emerges as the rite of passage into womanhood. As Joyce Ladner emphasizes in *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow* (1971): “If there was one common standard for becoming a woman that was accepted by the majority of the people in the community, it was the time when girls gave birth to their first child. This line of demarcation was extremely clear and separated the *girls* from the *women*” (215–16).⁴ In African American culture, motherhood is the pinnacle of womanhood. The matrifocal structure of black families with its emphasis on motherhood over wifedom and black women’s role as economic provider means that the wife role is less operative in the African American community and that motherhood is site of power for black women.

NURTURANCE AS RESISTANCE: PROVIDING A HOMEPLACE

The fourth way that African American mothering differs from the dominant model is the way in which nurturance of family is defined and experienced as a resistance. In African American culture, as theorist bell hooks has observed, the black family, or what she terms homeplace, operates as a site of resistance. She explains:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world. (1990: 42)

Hooks emphasizes that when she talks about homeplace she is not speaking merely of black women providing services for their families; rather, she refers to the creation of a safe place where, in her words, “black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination . . . [a place where] [they] had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture [their] spirits” (42).⁵ In a racist culture that deems black children inferior, unworthy, and unlovable, maternal love of black children is an act of resistance; in loving her children the mother instills in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object. African Americans, hooks emphasizes, “have long recognized the subversive value of homeplace and homeplace has always been central to the liberation struggle” (42). Like hooks, Collins maintains that children learn at home how to identify and challenge racist practices and it is at home that children learn of their heritage and community. At home they are empowered to resist racism, particularly as it becomes internalized. Collins elaborates:

Racial ethnic women’s motherwork reflects the tensions inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color. . . . [Racial ethnic] children must first be taught to survive in systems that oppress them. Moreover, this survival must not come at the expense of self-esteem. Thus, a dialectal relationship exists between systems of racial oppression designed to strip a subordinated group of a sense of personal identity and a sense of collective peoplehood, and the cultures of resistance extant in various ethnic groups that resist the oppression. For women of color, motherwork for identity occurs at this critical juncture. (1994: 57)

The empowerment of minority children through resistance and knowledge occurs at home and in the larger cultural space through the communal mothering and social activism spoken of earlier. This view of mothering differs radically from the dominant discourse of motherhood that configures home as politically neutral space and views nurturance as no more than the natural calling of mothers.

THE MOTHERLINE: MOTHERS AS CULTURAL BEARERS

The motherline, the fifth and final theme, considers the role black mothers play as cultural bearers and tradition keepers. Anglo-American feminist writer Naomi Lowinsky, author of *The Motherline: Every Woman’s Journey to Find her Female Roots* (1992), defines the motherline:

When a woman today comes to understand her life story as a story from the Motherline, she gains female authority in a number of ways. First, her Motherline grounds her in her feminine nature as she struggles with the many options now open to women. Second, she reclaims carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power. Third, as she makes

the journey back to her female roots, she will encounter ancestors who struggled with similar difficulties in different historical times. This provides her with a life-cycle perspective that softens her immediate situation. . . . Fourth, she uncovers her connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient worldview, which holds that body and soul are one and all life is interconnected. And, finally, she reclaims her female perspective, from which to consider how men are similar and how they are different. (13)

Writing about Lowinsky's motherline in her book *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* (1994), Hope Edelman emphasizes that "Motherline stories ground a . . . daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history. They transform the experience of her female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement" (201). Motherline stories, made available to daughters through the female oral tradition, unite mothers and daughters and connect them to their motherline. Naomi Lowinsky argues that many women today are disconnected from their motherline and have lost, as a consequence, the authenticity and authority of their womanhood. For Lowinsky, female empowerment becomes possible only in and through reconnecting to the motherline.

In African American society the motherline represents the ancestral memory, traditional values of African American culture. Black mothers pass on the teachings of the motherline to each successive generation through the maternal function of cultural bearing. Various African American writers argue that the very survival of African Americans depends upon the preservation of black culture and history. If black children are to survive they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their ancestors. In African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition: they are the culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential to the empowerment of black children and culture. "Black women," Karla Holloway continues, "carry the voice of the mother—they are the progenitors, the assurance of the line . . . as carriers of the *voice* [black women] carry wisdom—mother wit. They teach the children to survive *and* remember" (1987: 123). Black mothers, as Bernard and Bernard conclude, "pass on the torch to their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations" (47).

The above five themes demonstrate that mothers and motherhood are valued by and regarded as central to African American culture; as well mothers and mothering are recognized as that which makes possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture. The following section will detail how the centrality and significance of black motherhood gives rise to the empowerment of daughters. Black women, in connection with powerful mothers, become empowered as daughters. "I come from / a long line of / Uppity Irate Black Women" begins Kate Rushin's poem, "Family Tree." "And [when] you ask me how come / I think I'm so cute," Kate Rushin replies, "I cultivate / Being uppity, / It's something / My Gramon taught me" (Bell-Scott 1993: 176–77).

AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, in their early but important work *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (1981), contrast Anglo-American and African American women's experiences of motherhood and daughterhood. Joseph argues that respect for the mother was a central and organizing theme of the mother-daughter relationships examined. She also found that female socialization centered upon the teaching of survival skills and an insistence upon independence:

What was startlingly evident, as revealed in the mother/daughter questionnaire, was the teaching of survival skills to females for their survival *in* and for the survival *of* the Black community. Intra-group survival skills were given more importance and credence than survival skills for dealing with the White society at large. There is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enables them to survive, exist, succeed, and be important to and for the Black communities. . . . Black daughters are actually "taught" to hold the Black community together. (106)⁶

The independence that mothers insist upon for their daughters is to be achieved through education and effort. This may be contrasted to the dominant narrative of Anglo-American feminine achievement that scripts marriage as the avenue through which women will "get ahead." The African American mothers' insistence upon independence for their daughters includes a critique of marriage, particularly the dependency inherent in the wife role. These mothers recognize with Miriam Johnson that it is the wife role and not the mother role that organizes women's secondary status. "Through Mom's guidance and direction," comments Candace Bernard in "Passing the Torch" (1998), "I learned the value of hard work, self-determination, goal-setting, and shared responsibility. . . . I experienced empowerment through Mom's ability to survive in a climate that was not conducive to survival." The daughter adds, "It is empowering to know that I have come from such a long line of strong Black women. . . . I feel honored that . . . I am able to carry on the struggle you began a generation ago" (48–49).

A black daughter also, as Barbara Turnage discusses in her article, "The Global Self-Esteem of an African-American Adolescent Female and Her Relationship with her Mother," develops high self-esteem through a secure and close attachment with her mother and knowledge of her African American heritage. Her study of 105 African American young women ranging in age from sixteen to eighteen, found that the most significant variable was "trust of the mother": "African American mothers play an important role in their daughters' self-esteem development. That is, the young women in this study who had high self-esteem also trusted their mothers to be there for them" (O'Reilly and Abbey 2000: 184). The second significant variable for self-esteem was "acknowledgment of an

African ancestry”: “For an adolescent African-American female knowledge of her African heritage helps her define her body image and structure her expectations” (184). The message of this study, Turnage emphasizes, can not be “overstated”:

The relationship between these African-American young women and their mothers instilled in them the knowledge that they are competent and lovable. Based on their trust in their mothers, these young women believed, when confronted with difficult situations, that they could rely on their mothers’ assistance. Thus, as they grow into black womanhood, they grow with the knowledge that they can accomplish their goals and that they are worthy of love and respect. (184)

These daughters, connected with their mothers and motherline (awareness of heritage), develop a strong and proud identity as black women and secure empowerment.

Contemporary African American women’s writing also celebrates mothers as mentors and role models and illustrates the power daughters obtain in connection with their mothers and motherline. Readers of black women’s literature have long observed a deeply rooted matrilineal tradition in which daughters think back through their mothers. In Marianne Hirsch’s words, “[there is] in much of contemporary black women’s writing, a public celebration of maternal presence” (177). In a 1980 article, appropriately entitled “I Sign My Mother’s Name” (Perry 1984), Mary Helen Washington speaks of a “generational continuity” among African American women in which “a mother serves as the female precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter and provides a model for the black woman’s literary presence in this society” (147). “For black women writers,” as Dolana Mogadime observes in “A Daughter’s Praise Poem for her Mother,” “the idea of thinking back through our mothers is rooted in the notion of revisiting and learning about maternal knowledge and female-centred networks as expressions of African continuities in contemporary society” (87). Respect and gratitude for “women who made a way out of no way” is repeated time and time again in the recent collection of writings on black mothers and daughters, appropriately entitled *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers & Daughters* (Bell-Scott 1993).

In an introductory section to this collection, Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes: “In selection after selection, daughters acknowledge how their mothers provided road maps and patterns, a ‘template,’ which enabled them to create and define themselves. . . . Though daughters must forge an identity which is separate from the mothers, they frequently acknowledge that a part of themselves is truly their mothers’ child” (61). Margaret Walker, in her poem appropriately entitled “Lineage,” pays tribute to her grandmothers who “were strong / . . . full of sturdiness and singing” (175). Sonia Sanchez writes: “My life flows from you Mama. My style comes from a long line of Louises who picked me up in the night to keep me from wetting the bed. . . . A long line of Lizzies who made me understand love. . . . A Long line of Black people holding each other up against silence”

(25–26). Judy Scales-Trent writes: “my mother opened the door / . . . and set me free” (213). The first stanza of Irma McClaurin’s poem, “The Power of Names,” reads: “I slip my mother’s name on like a glove / and wonder if I will become like her / absolutely. / Years number the times I have worn her pain / as a child, as a teenager, as a woman—my second skin— / as she sat, silver head bowed / silent / hedging the storm” (63).

In her moving autobiographical narrative, *Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Woman’s Journey Home* (1993), some of which is excerpted in *Double Stitch*, Gloria Wade-Gayles argues that in the segregated South of the forties, “[s]urviving meant being black, and being black meant believing in our humanity, and retaining it, in a world that denied we had it in the first place” (6). The survival of black culture and black selfhood was sustained by the motherline. “The men in my family were buttresses and protectors,” writes Wade-Gayles, “but it was the women who gave meaning to the expression ‘pushed back to strength’” (13). Whether named mentor, role model, guide, advisor, wise woman, or advocate, the mother represents for the daughter a sturdy bridge on which to cross over. Even the author Renita Weems who was abandoned by her alcoholic mother writes: “Though not as sturdy as others, she is my bridge. When I needed to get across she steadied herself long enough for me to run across safely” (Bell-Scott 1993: 129).

Alice Walker’s classic essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983), is a moving tribute to her African American foremothers who, in her words, “handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (240). “[S]o many of the stories that I write,” Walker emphasizes, “that we all write, are my mother’s stories” (240). Walker delineates here a theory of creative identity that juxtaposes the male paradigm of literary achievement that demands separation and individuation. As Dannabang Kuwabong observes about Africaribbean women’s writing, but germane, I argue, to all black female diaspora literature, “the mother-daughter relationship . . . is central to the development of identity and voice” (1998: 132). Cassie Premo Steele’s observation about Audre Lorde is likewise applicable to many black women writers: “Grounding her narrative in matrilineal history and myth allows Lorde to find and take root: to form her identity” (8). Black female subjectivity generally, and creativity specifically, are formed, nurtured, and sustained through women’s identification with, and connection to, their motherline. As Sylvia Hamilton, noted documentary writer and director, commented in the film *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, “[Our foremothers] created a path for us . . . we are bound to something larger than our selves. . . . I am moved by the example of their lives” (1989).

African American daughters seek and hold connection with mothers and the motherline; they achieve empowerment through this identification because motherhood is valued by and is central to African American culture and because the motherline bestows to the daughter affirming and empowering lessons and images of black womanhood. In *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of*

Black Teenage Motherhood (1997), Elaine Bell Kaplan, proposes a “poverty of relationship” thesis to account for the high incidence of black unwed teenage pregnancy. “[T]eenage mothers,” she writes, “describe being disconnected from primary family relations, abandoned by their schools and by the men in their lives . . . at the time of adolescence, when it is most important that they experience positive relationships” (11). The absence of relationships in the adolescent girl’s life, Kaplan argues, results from the loss of black neighborhood and community occasioned by the economic restructuring of the 1970s. In the 1950s and 1960s a strong sense of family and community prevailed in black neighborhoods; there was also a low incidence of unwed teenage pregnancy. Whether the two are causally related as Kaplan maintains, her argument explicates, albeit inadvertently, the connection-empowerment thesis advanced here. Disconnection, a word Kaplan herself uses, is at the core of the adolescent girl’s aloneness and at the center of the community’s despair. As African American women celebrate the power acquired through connection to a strong mother and a strong motherline, Kaplan’s words remind us that the very survival of African American culture may depend on it.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS AND SONS

Most of the writing by African American women has tended to focus on the mother-daughter relationship; little has been written on the mother-son relationship.⁷ The notable exceptions are Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell’s *Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice* (1995) and *Saving our Sons: Raising Black Children in a Turbulent World* (1995) by novelist Marita Golden.⁸ In the introduction to their book, King and Mitchell, explaining their research interest in mothers and sons, write: “Considering the particular vulnerability of black males in this society and the role that mothers typically play as primary nurturers, this focus on black mother-to-son parenting is long overdue” (2). The initial question King and Mitchell explored in selected African-American fiction and asked of their research participants was: “What have you done to protect your son(s) from society’s hostile forces?” (6). In their study of African American literature they found that protection was the primary aim of black mothering and manifested itself in two diametrically opposed modes of mothering: “mothers who whip their sons brutally ‘for their own good’ and mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and overindulgence” (9). The first strategy is sustained by the belief that, in their words, “a black man-child duly ‘chastened’ or broken at home will pose less of a threat to a society already primed to destroy him” (10); while the latter seeks to shield the child from all that is deemed harsh and upsetting. Each position, they argue, psychologically maims the son: the first by breaking the child’s spirit, the latter by thwarting the child’s maturation to true selfhood. The question black mothers ask in the raising of their sons is, in the authors’ words, how can they “help sons develop the character, personality and integrity a black man-child needs to transcend these forces?” (1995, 19).

Golden's book also assumes as its central theme the survival of black men. Dedicated to the black men who have died violently in Washington, D.C., since 1988, Golden wrote this book, as she explains in her epilogue, "because at this moment there is no subject more necessary to confront, more imperative to imagine. Until I wrote about our sons, I could not speak or think or dream of anything else" (185). Homicide, Golden tells us, is the leading cause of death for young black men in America. The violence, drugs, crime, joblessness, and killing of black male youth mark, according to Golden, a new kind of Middle Passage. Her book narrates this crossing as it tells the story of her own son's journey into manhood; in this telling and testifying Golden lists possible causes, drafts solutions, and seeks to imagine what, in her words "we will look like, how will we sound, once we are spewed forth from the terrible hold of THIS ship" (9). "The major challenge . . . to a black mother raising sons today," as Claudette Lee and Ethel Wilson explain in "Masculinity, Matriarchy, and Myth: A Black Feminist Perspective," is "survival. . . Racism, discrimination, and oppression define the childhood of an African-American male. Mothering for an African-American woman is defined by fear for her male child. Therefore her approach and relationship with her son must be different" (56–57).

Golden, as did King and Mitchell, recognizes that, for parents with the financial means, retreat has become the strategy of choice. Golden withdrew her son from public school in Washington, D. C., and enrolled him in a private boarding school, as she and her husband purchased a house in the suburbs. However, in saving your son this way, you remove him from the black community and its history, the "sites of resistance"—family, community, history—that have traditionally nurtured and empowered African Americans by creating black-defined narratives and identities. The women of King and Mitchell's study spoke of the "liberating, healing power of family lore, bloodlines and family secrets" (37). "[K]nowing about ancestors," King and Mitchell write, "strengthens identification with family values that can help a son overcome anger and hopelessness. Such family lore can also develop a son's confidence in himself. . . . [It] free[s] black males from the diminished definitions of their humanity and self-worth that society offers them" (38). Golden, too, recognizes that the double consciousness of which Dubois eloquently wrote more than a hundred years ago is, in her words, "draining and sometimes killing our spirits" (14). With integration came the loss of communities, traditions, beliefs, legends, narratives, and rituals, the "sites of resistance," that have long sustained and enriched black American culture.⁹ While suburbs and boarding schools may save black sons from the killing fields of the so-called American inner cities, they also result in the further disintegration of black communities, the very thing that holds the promise of salvation for African Americans.

King, Mitchell, the women of their research group, and Golden agree that sons must be taught, in Golden's words, "that the first line of defense against racism is to mold themselves into disciplined, self-respecting refutations of its ability to destroy our souls, or ourselves" (186). Or as James Baldwin wrote in

1971: “[I]t evolves upon the mother to invest the child, her man child, with some kind of interior dignity which will protect him against something he really can’t be protected against, unless he has some kind of interior thing within him to meet it” (quoted in King 1995: 39). Audre Lorde wrote in “Manchild: A Black Lesbian Feminist Response” (1984) that “[f]or survival, Black children in America must be raised to be warriors. For survival they must also be raised to recognize the enemy’s many faces” (75). She goes on to say:

The strongest lesson I can teach my son is the same lesson I teach my daughter: how to be who he wishes to be for himself. And the best way I can do this is to be who I am and hope that he will learn from this not how to be me, which is not possible, but how to be himself. And this means how to move to that voice from within himself, rather than to those raucous, persuasive, or threatening voices from outside, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be. (77)

The aim of the black mothering is thus to nurture and sustain the “soul,” “voice within,” and “the interior thing” of black sons so that they are able to transcend the maiming of racism and grow into manhood whole and complete. Mothers of black sons, according to these writers, while they must negotiate between the need to keep their sons physically safe while simultaneously promoting their psychological maturation, must primarily aim to nurture and sustain that “soul,” “voice within,” and “interior thing.”¹⁰ For mothers of black sons this is achieved by grounding sons in their culture of origin, the black community, and connecting them to their African American motherline¹⁰.

The presence and involvement of the mother are recognized as crucial and essential to the son’s maturation. African American mothering foregrounds the importance and centrality of the mother in the son’s life for it is she who both provides protection and teaches her son how to protect himself, physically and otherwise, and passes on the important teachings of the African American motherline. Presence and participation in the sons’ lives are emphasized in African American culture because black boys’ lives are at risk. Black mothers must protect their sons to ensure their survival, both physically and psychologically, and teach them how to do the same for themselves. The son’s well-being thus depends upon, as it does with his sister, the presence and involvement of his mother in his life. The emphasis upon maternal involvement with sons and maternal connection for daughters underscores the importance of mothers and motherline in African American culture. The African American tradition of motherhood—othermothering, matrilocality, social activism, providing a homeplace, and cultural bearing—gives mothers, motherhood, and the motherline power and prominence in African American culture. Mothers from this site of authority empower their children through the above five themes or tasks of African American mothering; children, in turn, secure this empowerment through connection with their mothers and motherline.

Reflecting upon these five themes of black motherhood I am reminded of the chorus from Canadian singer-songwriter Jann Arden’s song “Good Mother”:

I've got a good mother
 and her voice is what keeps me here
 Feet on ground
 Heart in hand
 Facing forward
 Be yourself.

African American motherhood, in the five themes detailed above, bestows upon black children a loved, strong, and proud selfhood. The mother, in fulfilling these tasks of black motherhood, becomes, to borrow the metaphor from the song, “the voice that keeps [the children] here.” She is the “heart in the hand” that enables the children to “face forward with feet on the ground and be themselves.” Whether it be connection that it is emphasized, as in the mother-daughter relationship, or involvement, as with mothers and sons, mothering in black culture is what ensures physical and psychological survival and well-being and is what makes resistance possible.

MOTHERHOOD AS A SITE OF POWER IN MORRISON: THE “ANCIENT PROPERTIES” AND THE “FUNK”

The above five themes provide the foundation for Morrison’s theory of motherhood as a site of power for black women and motherwork as concerned with the empowerment of children. Building upon the traditions of matrifocality, cultural bearing, social activism, providing a home place, and othermothering discussed above, Morrison defines motherhood, and in particular maternal identity, as a site of agency and authority for black women. More specifically these practices and beliefs in Morrison become elaborated and refined as particular characteristics, which she calls the ancient properties and the funk, that together make motherhood a site of power for black women.

In an interview with Bill Moyers (1989), Morrison describes motherhood as

the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. . . . Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal “other.” The children’s demands on me were things that nobody ever asked me to do. To be a good manager. To have a sense of humor. To deliver something that somebody could use. And they were not interested in all the things that other people were interested in, like what I was wearing or if I were sensual. All that went by. You’ve seen the eyes of your children. They don’t want to hear it. They want to know what you are going to do now—today. Somehow all of the baggage that I had accumulated as a person about what was valuable just fell away. I could not only be me—whatever that was—but somebody actually needed me to be that. It’s different from being a daughter. It’s different from being a sister. If you listen to your children and look at them, they make demands that you can live up to. They don’t need all that overwhelming love either. I mean, that’s just you being vain about it. If you listen to them, somehow you are able to free yourself from baggage

and vanity and all sorts of things, and deliver a better self, one that you like. The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want. Not the one that frowned when they walked in the room and said “Pull your socks up.” Also, you could begin to see the world through their eyes again—which are your eyes. I found that extraordinary. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 270–71)

In this statement Morrison defines mothering, in the words of Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, “as a freeing, generative experience” (2). Such a view, they emphasize, contrasts sharply with “the predominant image of the mother in white Western society [which assumes mothers are] ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing . . . not destroyed or overwhelmed by the demands of [their] child[ren]” (2–3).¹¹ Motherhood in a Western context, as numerous Anglo-American feminist theorists on motherhood have pointed out, is organized as a patriarchal institution that is deeply oppressive to women. When white middle-class mothers write about motherhood, as Elizabeth Johnson explains, “they write about their own struggles for identity in the institution of motherhood” (33). Morrison, in contrast, states that motherhood *liberated* her and gave her a “better self.” Motherhood, for Morrison, is a site of liberation and self-realization, because her standpoint on motherhood is developed from black women’s everyday practices and meaning of motherhood wherein motherhood is a site of power for black women. More specifically, Morrison takes traditional conceptions of black womanhood—what Morrison terms “the ancient properties”—and traditional black values—what she calls the funk—and makes them central to her definition of motherhood as a site of power for black women.

Black women, Toni Morrison commented in an *Essence* interview with Judith Wilson (1981),

[need to] pay . . . attention to the ancient properties—which for me means the ability to be “the ship” *and* the “safe harbor.” Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children and there was no problem. . . . What we have known is how to be complete human beings, so that we did not let education keep us from our nurturing abilities . . . [t]o lose that is to diminish ourselves unnecessarily. It is not a question, it’s not a conflict. You don’t have to give up anything. You *choose* your responsibilities. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 135)

In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison elaborates further:

[T]he point is that freedom is choosing your responsibility. . . . [It]’s choosing the ones you want. . . . A lady doctor has to be able to say, “I want to go home.” And the one at home has the right to say, “I want to go to medical school.” That’s all there is to that, but then the choices cause problems where there are no problems because “either/or” seems to set up the conflict, first in the language and then in life. . . . I tried hard to be both the