The Heart of the Matter: 
Motherhood and Marriage in the 
Autobiographies of Maya Angelou 

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It is indisputable that Maya Angelou’s contribution to the autobiographical form in America remains unsurpassed. Angelou’s unique probing of the interior self, her distinctive use of humour and self-mockery, her linguistic sensibility, as well as her ability to balance the quest for human individuality with the general condition of black Americans distinguish her as a master of the genre. While she breaks new ground by exposing issues such as rape and incest within the black community, she also uses her maturing understanding of family and community to project an individual’s attempt to forge and maintain a healthy sense of self within a group that is undergoing a cultural transition. Focussing particularly on Angelou’s use of the maternal trope as a controlling device in this regard, this paper explores how racial, class, and gender oppression affect the experience of motherhood in the United States between the 1940s and 1960s.

This essay argues that Angelou’s experiences as a working-class mother “demythify” the socially accepted white notions of domesticated motherhood, the supremacy of the nuclear family structure, and the blissfulness inherent in the institution of marriage. All three factors challenge the “cult of true womanhood,” a bourgeois Eurocentric perspective that has shaped how people think about family life in the United States. By systematically reflecting on black women’s roles as workers within their families and in societies at large, Angelou’s womanist theories, as they are inscribed in autobiography, thus bring into relief the ideologies that serve to mythologize women’s experiences as mothers and wives, as well as the hierarchical divisions that generate conflict and struggle within families. In essence, much more than bringing sexuality, childbearing, and child rearing practices into the domain of politics, Angelou’s autobiographical works attempt to reveal the multiple and dynamic interconnections between households—home and family—and the larger political economy.

From the very beginning of her experiences as a teenage mother, Angelou wrestles with the need to work to provide for her baby. Given her racial and class background, it should come as no surprise that Angelou’s experience of motherhood is so inextricably intertwined with work. As a black American woman, she comes from a long tradition of female independence and responsibility. Slavery never allowed for domesticity among slave women who had to work in the plantation house or the fields.

Raised first by her maternal grandmother, Momma, a daughter of ex-slaves, and a self-sufficient businesswoman and mother, Maya gives birth to her son, Guy, while living with her biological mother Vivian, a self-sufficient entrepreneur in her own right. Momma is widowed and Vivian is divorced. In neither home is there a male income provider in the traditional sense. Even if there were, the women would still have to work to add to the often meager wages that internal colonialism ensured black men earned.

Whereas motherhood was usually associated with domesticity and reproductive labor (work inside the home) for white women in America between the 1940s and 1960s, for
black women and women of other racially oppressed groups, motherhood was, and always has been, inseparable from work, both productive (income-earning) and reproductive. Describing this connection, Patricia Hill Collins uses the term “motherwork” to connote the need for racially oppressed women to “work for the day to come,” whether for one’s children, those of the community, or for those yet unborn. Motherwork, capturing the inseparability of work from motherhood in oppressed communities, is a term that also reduces the dichotomies in feminist theorizing, which rigidly distinguish between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as autonomous and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one’s group.

Collins also shows how the white feminists’ dichotomous split of the public sphere (economic and political discourse) from domestic (private, non-economic, apolitical) regrettably distinguishes one domain as “male” and the other as “female” in a manner that disregards black women’s realities. Black mothers have always worked in both spheres. Working-class and racially oppressed women often work at home in many income earning activities (for example, letting out rooms, child minding, sewing, washing and ironing laundry) and are, therefore, never exclusively domesticated. Thus, contrary to the white cult of “true womanhood” that was still upheld in the middle of the twentieth century—when productive work was seen as incompatible with motherhood—black motherhood always encompassed work.

Rellying on her experience of black culture, wherein self-reliance and motherhood are integrated, Maya rejects the option of seeking government assistance, a decision which leads to work situations that highlight how racist capitalism drives black women into a poverty that is not only financial but at times also moral. In Gather Together in My Name, the sequel to I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou writes about the problems she faced as a working teenage mother, an unprofessional black girl to whom only the most menial jobs are available. Because she has no skills and has refused Vivian’s offer to take care of her son so she can continue with her education, Maya ends up living along the periphery of society, “exploring the perimeter of the cage.” Here, in the post-World War II milieu, evil abounds. And, although the kings and queens of the underworld—gamblers and prostitutes, black-marketeers and boosters—may be the last to feel the pinch, poverty is everywhere. It is in such an environment that the need to support herself and her son leads Maya to some quick and easy choices.

Being only a teenager, Maya is at an age where she is still very vulnerable, easily deceived, and has yet to define herself and her own morality. At the book’s lowest point she works as a prostitute with the hope of raising enough money to rescue her sugar daddy–pimp from debt. This, she innocently thinks, will enable him to divorce his wife and ultimately lead her to that most blissful state, marriage. Foolish as Maya’s logic may be in these particular circumstances, the situation demonstrates how even black men have been willing to abuse the black woman’s ability to work in that space in which the distinctions between the private and public spheres have been erased.

Maya’s work experiences thus show how the lack of skills and the racist practice of excluding blacks from meaningful employment are the real culprits for despair and drug abuse, not working outside the home. A clear example of the exclusion of black mothers from constructive economic engagement arises when a white personnel supervisor fails Maya in a simple test that would qualify her to be a trainee operator. Consequently, she ends up as a “dumb” bus girl who must wait on the white girls who had been her classmates (Gather Together, 6-7).

This is one of the reasons for Angelou’s unrelenting protest against racial injustice, which she records throughout her volumes. Her own life is evidence that the conditions that are allegedly due to being a working mother are rapidly improved when poor people are given jobs to earn a decent living. For instance, when Maya is given an...
opportunity to appear in "Porgy and Bess," her life takes a turn for the better. Her financial situation improves and thereafter her whole life becomes more fulfilling. Not only is she now better able to provide for her son, she is then better able to contribute to society in general.

The long list of Maya's menial jobs, which includes those on the fringes of society, shows how the false assumption that working outside the home would liberate women from economic dependency on men was one of the major weaknesses of the later feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. This assumption was the main thesis of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's proposition obviously reflected the middle-class bias and composition of the feminist movement whose stance disregarded the fact that millions of black women, other women of color, and working-class white women had been working outside their homes for decades. bell hooks also notes that the bourgeois assumption that working outside the home would bring women self-fulfillment did not take into account the nature of the work—that it is often demeaning, repetitive, so-called "menial" labor in which the majority of women from other racial and class backgrounds were already engaged.

The assumption is that white middle class feminists limited their definition of work to high paying careers. As a result, the majority of women of color and working-class white women did not identify themselves with a movement that failed to address their desire to quit working, since the work they were doing (and still continue to do) was not liberating. The early feminist movement thus failed to arm the majority of women with strategies against economic exploitation and dehumanization.

In this regard, Angelou's insertion of racially and economically oppressed women's motherwork to her revision of white middle-class maternal discourse is as necessary as her redefinition of family. If the former debunks the myth of domesticity, the latter "demythifies" the supremacy of the nuclear family structure. It would have been almost impossible for Maya to work full time if she did not have her mother and community "othermothers" to rely on for assistance with childcare. It is precisely because extended family in black communities includes people outside of kinship lines who show loyalty and a sense of obligation, that Maya can leave her son with different care providers or friends while she searches for a viable career.

Almost as important as self-reliance to the black mother is the understanding that it occurs within a socio-cultural context in which self-reliance means sometimes relying on other people on the community. This sense of community and the tendency to share mothering responsibilities are values which have also ensured the survival of other, immigrant, families.

Having shown us in her first autobiography how she came to have two mothers, Vivian and Momma, the pattern continues in her adult life when her own son is sometimes in his grandmother Vivian's care. As a black single mother, one who must provide both emotionally and financially for her child, Maya's experience of family, as recorded throughout the series of autobiographies, follows a set of rules that is distinct from that of middle-class white Americans. For Maya, family is neither nuclear, nor restricted to household. For middle-class white Americans, the ideal family is the archetypal middle-class nuclear structure with a father who earns enough to exempt his spouse and dependent children from work. Being the sole income earner in his family, he exerts power over the women in the household as much as over those in the workforce, since owing to his race, gender, and class, he earns more than they do. This is the traditional pattern the ruling class has set up as the norm, the standard that others may wish to emulate.

On the other hand, traditional family structure in the black community in America has its origins in Africa. According to anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa, in African communities, marital and family stability are not the same thing. Lineages, rather than married couples, are the core around which the typi-
cal African extended family is built. This form of family organization, Sudarkasa argues, is one of the traditional African retentions which have enabled the survival of the Afro-American people in the socially, economically, and politically oppressive climate of the United States. Cautioning that the term "extended family" not be used as a euphemism for "disorganized" family," she points to the "extended family" structure's flexibility, adaptability, and inclusiveness as strengths that have ensured its continuity in America, despite the scarce resources, economic insecurity, and cultural assault blacks have faced.

Sudarkasa points to the need to understand the traditional value placed on children and on their care within these structures. Traditional "extended family" structures are usually established along patriarchal lines in which a male figurehead has more than one wife. This often ties women's authority within the family to their status as mothers. In such polygynous relationships, women often share the care of their children so that they can more efficiently perform other daily chores.

By demonstrating to us the traditional centrality of othertwomen in black motherhood, Maya challenges the Western notion of children as property and demonstrates the importance of sharing one's children with other women in the community. She also shows how African and African-American communities have long realized that vesting one person with the full responsibility of mothering may not be wise, hence the role of othertwomen. Angelou's writing is thus a powerful attack on the nuclear family structure, especially in light of the studies that highlight the middle-class mother's isolation in the urban family.

Privileged white women and renowned psychoanalytic scholars, such as Nancy Chodorow, either worry about maternal isolation within the nuclear family or place emphasis on the all-powerful mother as the conduit for gender oppression. Meanwhile, maternal separation from one's children (through work or death) is much more of an issue for racially oppressed women. Collins asserts that it is precisely because white middle-class women do not suffer from physical starvation that such a lot of time has been devoted to their psychological and emotional health. By contrast, women who are starving have to deal with issues of basic survival. For the latter, it is not the isolation, but the physical or socio-cultural separation of mothers and children in social structures designed to disempower individuals and communities that is a much more pressing concern. Thus, unlike the situation of the privileged nuclear family where struggling for power or for one's autonomy is defined as the main human enterprise, for ethnic minority groups, the family is a unit of resistance to the oppressive system outside, rather than a sphere of conflict.

Although Angelou's writing demands respect for the working mother, the extended family, and for othertwomen, Maya's struggle demonstrates the tensions inherent in belonging to a group that values these notions of family, while living in a larger society that devalues them, as the drama underlying all five volumes. This tension is evident in Maya's feelings of rejection while she is a child in her grandmother's care as much as to her own frustrations when faced with the responsibility of raising Guy. While pursuing self-fulfilling career ambitions and living her own life often means relying on kin to help care for Guy, in the mid-twentieth century in America, the ethical ideological norm seems to be that good mothers are unselfish, meaning they put their children's needs before their own. In this context, therefore, Maya's confessed sense of guilt about leaving her son with relatives reflects the larger cultural expectations that a mother stays with her child at all times. Thus, while following in the footsteps of other "enraged" black mothers through her determination to protect and provide for her son against all odds testifies, the behavior this entails is not always seen as virtuous in the larger context.

Angelou projects the psychological split she experiences from this cultural dichotomy in two different ways. Firstly, she literally follows a pattern of departure from and
days in clean, middle-class neighborhoods” (Singin’ and Swingin’, 16). But, unlike their white counterparts, girls in the black communities found themselves “too often unmarried, bearing lonely pregnancies and wishing for two and a half children each who would gurgle happily behind that picket fence while we drove our men to work in our friendly-looking station wagons” (Singin’ and Swingin’, 16). Maya’s romanticism, influenced by Hollywood and lyrics from popular music, is soon confronted with reality when, in 1949, she marries her first husband Tosh Angelos, a Greek.

Having believed, in a “ferocious desperation,” that “marriage would give her a world free from danger, disease, and want” (Singin’ and Swingin’, 16), Maya soon discovers that real life offers no such guarantees. As a housewife, she is “legally a member of that enviable tribe of consumers whom security made fat as butter and who under no circumstances considered living by bread alone, because their husbands brought home the bacon” (Singin’ and Swingin’, 33). However, as the head of the household, Tosh expects her to give up her participation in the black church as well as her black friends. A very private person and an atheist, he underestimates the role of the black church in Maya’s life. As a member of an oppressed group, it is her spiritual life raft—something he apparently does not need—for, as a white man who enjoys racial and gender privileges, Tosh does not appear to understand the importance to Maya of religious faith.

Because Maya wants to live the dream, however, she compromises a lot of herself and puts up with Tosh’s demands. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of surrendering all of her independence to Tosh, the marriage ends in 1952. Even though Maya has been as perfect a wife as prescribed in women’s magazines, Tosh can no longer bear the restrictions of this ideal nuclear structure he has created anymore than he can bear the strain of being part of an inter-racial couple in the early 1950s. Since there was little real stability for Maya and her son once the novelty of it all wore off, it is no surprise that the divorced Maya describes herself as a “saner,
healthier person than the young, greedy girl who had wanted a man to belong to”—a fantasy she admits was “based on a Hollywood film, circa 1940” (Singin’ and Swingin’, 51).

Maya’s ideal of a glamorous Hollywood marriage is also a fantasy that reflects her mother’s influence on her. When the seven-year-old Maya first meets her mother after a four-year separation, she is literally assailed by her glamour and beauty. She “had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called ‘Mother’” (Caged Bird, 60). Maya can only compare this enchanting blues singer, who attracts men to her in a manner that makes her more than the average mother, to a movie star. Emphasizing this connection between Vivian and the movies, Angelou recalls her early experiences at the cinema in which Kay Francis, a white actress who closely resembles Vivian starred, thus:

I laughed too, but not at the hateful jokes [the movie] made on my people. I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just like my mother. Except that she lived in a big mansion with a thousand servants, she lived just like my mother. And it was funny to think of the whites folks’ not knowing that the woman they were adoring could be my mother’s twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier. Much prettier.

The movie star made me happy. It was extraordinary good fortune to be able to save up one’s money and go see one’s mother whenever one wanted to. (Caged Bird, 1189)

Having been so strongly impressed by her mother’s physical attributes and talent as a child, it is easy to see why the older Maya is a “movie-star wanna-be.” After being encouraged by Vivian to study dance and drama (Vivian teaches Maya her first dance steps and introduces her to the art of body movement in a bar), Maya’s ideal of the mother/wife as performer/glamour girl is not totally comprehensible, therefore. She emulates her mother, who, in many ways, presents her with an index of cultural assumptions about motherhood. In the final analysis, although Maya often finds Vivian’s beauty and blues lifestyle oppressively competitive (Maya felt ugly, was often neglected, and felt inferior by comparison to Vivian), it is also her ticket to success, one that ultimately leads to her writing career. Having said this, it is important to add that Maya rejects some of Vivian’s maternal practices. Unlike Vivian, who neglected her two children, Maya is very protective of her child.

Maya’s second marriage is to a black South African political activist, Vusi Make. When she meets him, she is engaged to a divorced black American bail bondsman, Thomas Allen. Although she is a radical civil rights activist—a fundraiser and the northern co-ordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s organization—Maya is so desperate to marry Allen that she even entertains the idea of straightening her hair and wearing pretty hats with flowers and gloves so she can look like a nice, marriageable, potential homemaker, instead of the non-traditional career woman she really is. Intelligent as she is, she is willing to live the rest of her life in a marriage where conversation is limited to her shouting in the bedroom and his grunting at the dining-room table. In other words, although fully aware that Allen only wants sex and food from her, Maya is prepared to consider that as sufficient, as long as she has a husband. As a result, a few months into her relationship with him, she practically proposes marriage to him even though she knows that he is not the right man for her.

Again, Maya is willing to compromise herself to attain the much-heralded state of marital bliss. Obviously, her desire for a stable male companion, though natural, is still shrouded by her long held fantasies. In real life, these fantasies, born of Maya’s loneliness and socially constructed ideals, do not come to fruition. Instead, she marries Vusi Make and has another revealing encounter with the fantasies of marital bliss versus the real experience of marriage.

The following passage, which describes their courtship, captures Maya’s idealization of their romance and demonstrates how Hollywood portrayals of Africa and the lifestyle of ease and glamour Vivian pursues influence Maya’s decision to marry Make:

At the dining table he spread before me the lights and shadows of Africa. Glories stood in thrilling array. Warrior queens, in necklaces of
blue and white beads, led armies against marauding Europeans. Nubile girls danced in celebration of the victories of Shaka, the Zulu king. The actual earth of Africa was “black and strong like the girls back home” and glinted with gold and diamonds. African men covered their brouchet with precious stones and specially woven cloth. He asked me to forgive the paucity of the gift he had for me and to understand that when we returned to Mother Africa he would adorn me with riches the likes of which I had never imagined. When he led me into the darkened guest room and placed a string of beads around my neck, all my senses were tantalized... The amber beads on my nut-brown skin caught fire. I looked into the mirror and saw exactly what I wanted to see, and more importantly, what I wanted him to see: a young African virgin, made beautiful for her chief. (Singin and Swain gin, 150-151)

MAKE, LIKE TOSH, also expects Maya not to work outside the home. Unlike Tosh, however, he seems to demand that a lot more of Maya’s energy be spent on housework. If in her marriage to Tosh she was spiritually starved, in her marriage to Make, she is physically overworked. Make inspects and supervises her housecleaning to ensure that she has reached every nook under the bed and has removed dust from literally every surface. Expressing her frustration, Maya confesses, “I wanted to be a wife and to create a beautiful home to make my man happy, but there was more to life than being a diligent maid with a permanent pussy” (Gather Together, 168). Angelou describes her daunting routine thus:

It seemed to me that I washed, scrubbed, mopped, dusted and waxed thoroughly every other day...I wiped down the walls, because dirty fingerprints could spoil his day, and ironed his starched shirts...

Each meal was a culinary creation, Chicken Kiev and feijoda, Eggs Benedict, and Turkey Terrazzini.

A good woman put ironed sheets on the bed and matched the toilet paper to the color of the bathroom tile.

I was unemployed but I had never worked so hard in all my life. (Heart of a Woman, 166)

Whereas Maya meets her side of the bargain, Make, on the other hand, is not as good a provider as he would like to believe. A political activist whose unstable income depends upon donations from sympathetic sponsors, he cannot have the lifestyle he desires. His insatiable appetite for expensive furniture and classy decor consequently throws the family into debt and embarrassment. Although the excitement of the foreign and exotic initially masks the realities for Maya, before long she realizes that Make is neither faithful nor capable of supporting them. In Egypt she defies her husband’s unrealistic attempts to put her on a pedestal, and starts to work outside the home.

Indeed, except for her short-lived marriage to Tosh, Maya has worked since she was sixteen years old. She has always known how much money she had, how to spend it, and when to pay her bills. Because Make keeps her in the dark about such crucial matters as the family’s finances, she feels frustrated and powerless. Her rebellious decision to work not only demonstrates how successfully she reclaims her independence, but also her pragmatism as she faces her reality squarely, instead of perpetuating illusions of grandeur.

BY TRYING TO FIT an African-American woman into his stereotypical idea of an African woman, Make shows no regard for Maya’s cultural background. Niara Sudarkasa posits the notion that because Afro-American women have always worked and bought their own high priced items (cars, furniture and clothes), they have traditionally had a strong position within the home. In other words, because black men’s earnings have not been able to provide more than half of the family’s income, black women have always had more egalitarian relationships with their husbands than is often the case white women. In the same vein, after meeting African women in England, Maya realizes that, despite Make’s portrayal, African women were not as docile, submissive, and powerless as his stereotypes held them to be.

More than anything, Make’s fantasy of African women as happy housewives, as much as his appetite for expensive furniture, shows the extent to which he has bought into Western ideals, ideals his career and socio-economic background do not enable him to fulfill. Ultimately, as well as underscoring the loss of her independence, Maya’s second marriage proves her fantasy of marriage...
bringing her stability and security to be only that: fantasies. The dispelling of this marriage fantasy highlights the impossibility for black working-class mothers of being blissful housewives. In short, Maya’s two failed marriages rid her of the notion that meeting the “right” man will liberate her from the need to work. Indeed, it is her healthy work ethic and her enterprising spirit that enable her to free herself from sexist husbands.  

Furthermore, because her need for a spouse is linked to her desire for a male role model for her son, by successfully raising Guy to be an independent, balanced, and well-rounded son, she proves that despite prevailing myths, the father’s presence is not always necessary in the consolidation of identity. Never making it look easy, Angelou gradually illustrates that there is a greater sense of accomplishment when one pursues one’s intellectual and career goals, goes beyond culturally prescribed boundaries of what mothers do, and does not allow oneself to be crippled by the absence of a husband.

Although more recent mainstream feminist autobiography has also challenged the traditional single-income, nuclear family as the only viable option, Angelou, writing between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, set a new path by showing how black families often serve as barometers of social change and as forerunners of adaptive patterns that will be progressively experienced by the more privileged sectors of society as they lose their privileges. To the extent that white and black families in the United States now experience similar political and global economic pressures, they respond in similar ways, including the adaptation of family structures. Through questioning the prevailing myths about the black family, Angelou demonstrates that behaviors which may have initially seemed unacceptable, deviant, or pathological to middle-class whites (for example, teenage childbirth, single parent families, and working mothers), might actually be the “traditional” strategies that have enabled black families to survive the harsh economic realities.

In conclusion, by recognizing the centrality of remembering and rewriting the history of black mothers while underscoring the intricate connection between maternal concerns and the racial or economic politics of her country, Angelou radicalizes autobiography and acknowledges its contribution to the struggle for racial equality. Commenting on the importance of writing for Third World women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes that “this process is significant, not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity.”

Ultimately, by analyzing her own experience of motherhood, Angelou is able to challenge the prevailing notions of maternity through questioning the feasibility of a domesticated motherhood for working-class black women, the supremacy of the nuclear family structure, and by dispelling the idealization of marriage. In the final analysis, although patriarchy exists in this moment of transition from traditional culture to feminism, Angelou demonstrates how she has always striven towards a self-empowering identity, one which can be seen as an inspiration for women (black or white) who confront “the heart of the matter.”

Bibliography


———, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting Merry Like Christmas (New York: Bantam Books, 1997).


**Endnotes**

1. The significance of motherhood is a unifying element in Angelou's five volumes, since the interplay between mother and child creates thematic continuity. For instance, while the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* marks the beginning of Maya's life as a mother, *Gather Together in My Name* relates her struggles as a teenage mother. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, she traces the tension between her pursuit of success as an entertainer and the guilt she feels as a mother who must leave her child to ensure a better future for both. Delineating her growth, in *The Heart of a Woman* she is a wiser, more mature woman and mother. Finally, in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, both Maya and son are adults and have established a healthy balance between dependence and independence as she leaves him at the university in Ghana while she returns to the United States.

2. This is the period of Angelou's motherhood in her first three volumes. It encompasses the post-World War II period in which many blacks migrated from the South to big cities in the North and the West of the country in search of better opportunities. This was followed by the Great Depression in the 1930s and the struggle for civil rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

3. Sometimes called "the cult of domesticity," this concept, which was developed in the mid-nineteenth century, refers to the notion that the [so-called] true woman is self-contained within her nuclear family, with specific and separate roles for men and women, and with an economic dependence on men, in such a way that motherhood is one's true occupation" (Teresa E. Shorton, 1996:57, quoted in Trudelle Thomas, "You'll Become a Lioness": African-American Women Talk About Mothering," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 2 (2), 2000:58-9).

4. To distinguish the protagonist from the writer, I use the first name to refer to the former. This is in line with Angelou's referral to "the Maya character," whom she envisioned as her invented self and as a "symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America." (See "The Maya Character": Interview with Jackie Kay, *Conversations with Maya Angelou*, Jeffrey Elliot ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 194-200.

5. Vivian often has live-in lovers who help pay for her upkeep, but she never stops earning her own income. Even when she is married to a successful businessman, she continues to earn her own income by renting out rooms in her 14-room house.

6. Even within the black middle-class, women have had to work to keep the family's median income within the middle class bracket because even black middle-class women often do not earn enough for the wife to stay at home. (Op. Cit., 101).

7. Evelyn Nakano Glenn defines internal colonialism in the United States as that system which perpetuates discriminatory barriers and wage scales that keep minorities at the bottom of the economic scale, doing the dirtiest and the most menial jobs ("Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class Oppression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 17(3), 1985: 87).

8. Due to the history of slavery, "labor" was therefore "raced" as well as "classed" in American culture. "Ladies" did labor, or if they did, were not to appear to have labored, according to the domestic ideology of the "cult of true womanhood" which defined (white) women as domestic angels, and mothers of superior moral quality" (Harris, Jennifer, "Reading Mobility, Motherhood and Domesticity in Four African-American Women's Texts," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 2 (2), 2000: 201). Because black women slaves had had to work like their male counterparts, while their womanly virtues were exploited because they were not white ladies, black mothers expressed themselves in what scholars refer to as the trope of "the enraged mother." This means they had to be tough-minded in the protection of and provision for their children, due to their ready assumption that America is a foreboding and dangerous place for children and mothers.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


13. For a more recent study that shows that pragmatism, flexible sex roles, outside-the-home employment, and responsibility to and for one's extended family are uncertainties for most African-American women than for their white counterparts, see Trudelle
Thomas, “You’ll Become a Lioness.”

14. Driven by idealism, feigned independence, and pride, Maya did not trust Vivian, who had neglected her, to take sufficient care of her grandson. Later, however, she leaves her son with Vivian for a whole year when she goes on an international tour with “Porgy and Bess.”


17. She is only 17 to 19 years old in this text.

18. Angelou once had a job scraping paint off cars by hand. Describing her poverty, she writes: “The tough texture of poverty in my life had been more real than sand wedged between my teeth” (“Singin’ and Swingin’,” 18).

19. By the time she gets her first meaningful employment opportunity as a salesgirl in a record shop, Maya has also been a waitress, a short-order cook, R.L. Poole’s dance partner, a conveyor of stolen clothes, an assistant in a real estate office, and an assistant in a dress shop.

20. hooks, bell, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (South End Press: Boston, MA, 1984), 95.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid. This kind of labor provided little financial freedom. At most, it enabled these women to supplement their husbands’ meager incomes. In these conditions, husbands, also exploited in low-paying jobs, were not the enemy from whom the working women had to free themselves, but the partners with whom they had to collaborate to save for the deposit for the house, a car, or the children’s college tuition.


28. Ibid.


31. Ibid., xxii.

32. Although some mainstream feminists are now attempting to redefine family and community, many still rely on the nuclear model of getting the father involved rather than depending upon extended family and othermothers.


34. Ibid., 72.


36. Ibid.


39. Glenn, 103.

40. More than once, she even relies on her mother for financial assistance. This is possible because in the extended family system, adulthood does not strictly mean establishing your own household. Single adults may live with parents or married siblings (Sudarkasa, 8). The positive values placed on generosity and reciprocity in this system (inter-family cooperation) often contrast with nuclear families, in which individualism, competition, selfishness, and separateness abound (Op. cit., 9). Examples of separateness that are evident in real life (not the hypothetical ideal) nuclear family are the generation gap and the hating or rejection of one’s parents (Op. cit., 10).

41. McPherson, 18.


44. McPherson, 69.

45. “A good wife had to be constant, faithful, clean (floors waxed and beaten rugs), economical, a good cook, and a compliant lover” (“Singin’ and Swingin’,” 45).

46. Vivian lives her life as though she is somebody wealthier than she actually is. She works in gambling salons, but lives as though she is a movie star.

47. Dolly McPherson’s reference to Maya’s folly of thinking that despite her success and independence she needs a man to make her life and her son’s complete (McPherson, 98) disregards Maya’s stated motive of warding off loneliness. Although the feminist ethic that McPherson is espousing here views male companionship as unnecessary, the Afrocentric ethic on which I am basing my thesis has a more realistic attitude towards the emotional and sexual needs of adults (See Sudarkasa, 9).


49. African women have always worked: farming in the fields, making crafts for sale, or as entrepreneurs in the market place. It was the patriarchal colonial policies of privileging men in education, training, and funding programs (based on the European models) that diminished their roles in the public sphere (Sudarkasa, xxiii). Consequently, African womanists look at the more marginalized and reduced relevance of the so-called modern African woman and articulate her disempowerment in the context of “dewomanization” (Nwaezeaka, 10).

50. Feminist scholars bell hooks also laments that women often put too much value on interpersonal relationships instead of work. Consequently, even those women who have achieved economic self-sufficiency are often as unable to liberate themselves from oppressive relationships with sexist individuals as those women who do no wage labor and depend upon others for their economic survival (Feminist Theory, 105).
