THEORIZING BLACK FEMINISMS

The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women

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MOTHERING

A possible Black feminist link to social transformation?

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The death of my grandmother in 1988 served to reunite physically and emotionally all her living children, grandchildren, some of her great-grandchildren, and a host of other biological and fictive kin. My 9-year-old daughter who was trying to adjust to our recent move from Colorado to Wisconsin was nearly overwhelmed by the trauma of her great-grandmother’s death. Since she seemed to be unable to “hear” what I was trying to say to her about these critical moments in her young life, it became apparent that a need existed for someone else to step in to provide a listening ear as well as the wisdom so necessary for her support as she attempted (successfully) to navigate through these crises.

The woman who so graciously accepted the role of “othermother” for my child had been a “neglected child” – although neither term was used in those days. “Othermothered” by my grandmother, she had become an informally adopted member of our network of fictive kin. It had been my grandmother’s simple belief that all children must be fed, clothed and sent to school. If for some reason their biological parents were unable or unwilling to discharge these obligations, then it was incumbent upon some other member of the community to accept that responsibility. This fictive kin who stepped in to counsel my daughter was upholding a family tradition that had been modeled by my grandmother some fifty years before.

The acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of non-blood related children in their community shown by my grandmother and her fictive daughter is hardly unique to the African-American community. While western conceptualizations ofmothering have often been limited to the activities of females with their biological offsprings, mothering within the Afro-American community and throughout the Black diaspora can be viewed as a form of cultural work or what Bernice Johnson Reagon calls “the entire way a community organizes to nurture itself and future generations” (Reagon, 1989: 167–80). Thus my grandmother and her fictive daughter were upholding a tradition which enlarges upon limited conceptualizations of mothering.

This chapter will examine Afro-American and West African concepts of othermothering and its importance to the survival of the Black community. My thesis is that these forms of mothering, which have their roots in a traditional African world-view, may serve as an important Black feminist link to the development of new models for social transformation in the twenty-first century.

Othermothers can be defined as those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of child care for short- to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin. They not only serve to relieve some of the stress that can develop in the intimate daily relationships of mothers and daughters but they can also provide multiple role models for children (Troester, 1984; Collins, 1987). This concept of othermothering which has its roots in the traditional African world-view and can be traced through the institution of slavery, developed in response to an evergrowing need to share the responsibility for child nurturance.

In the traditional African world-view as in the world-views of indigenous peoples around the globe, a very high value is placed on reproduction. As John Mbiti has argued, reproduction is perceived as a means of strengthening the human group and ensuring the survival of life. It is, in fact, equated with the life force itself. The status of women – whose activities are centered around reproduction, the physical and emotional nurturance of children, and household maintenance – is enhanced by the supreme symbolic link attached to them and their crucial role in reproduction. Thus within the indigenous African context, mothering is highly regarded. It incorporates the symbolism of creativity and continuity, and as such forms an integral aspect of women’s identity (Mbiti, 1969).

While mothering does indeed incorporate a nurturing component for one’s biological offspring, it is also not uncommon for African women to undertake nurturing responsibilities for children other than their immediate offspring (Oppong, 1973). For example, women in traditionally polygynous relationships, who were compatible with each other, often shared the care of all children within the household so that they could more easily and efficiently discharge their household maintenance responsibilities. This was especially true in many traditional West African societies where the nurturing aspect of the mothering role also incorporated economic productivity (Henn in Hay and Stichter, 1984; Cutrufo, 1983; Njoku, 1980; Smock in Giele and Chapman, 1977).

The role of women in the former Gold Coast or what is now called Ghana is instructive in this regard. At the time of colonization, the Gold
Coast was comprised of some 200 separate political units of which the most important were the Akan, Ewe, Ga and the "Northern." Throughout the region women were expected to marry and produce children for the survival of the lineage. As wives and mothers, they were responsible for the physical and emotional nurturance of children. They were also responsible for maintaining the household. In order to discharge these responsibilities, including providing a share of the economic basis for household maintenance, women in the Gold Coast were economically active in their own right—not merely as auxiliaries to their husbands. Those who were farmers, cultivated their own plots of land and although men were responsible for clearing all the land, women were not reciprocally obligated to cultivate the crops on men's plots. Women planted, weeded and harvested nonstaple foodstuffs such as vegetables. They fed their families, sold any remaining surplus and used the profits in ways they deemed necessary. Other women who lived on the coast and were married to fishermen undertook the preservation of fish through smoking and then bartered or sold the catch. Still others produced handicrafts and many engaged in trading. Regardless of their vocations or class positions, women were expected to provide a share of the household and children's expenses out of their financial profits (Smock, 1977; Callaway, 1976; Pellow and Chazan, 1986).4

In addition to patterns of shared child care in polygynous households, childcare responsibilities were also diffused through the common African practice of fostering children. African communal societies were characterized by high degrees of interdependence and the belief that individual self-development and personal fulfillment were dependent upon the well-being of all members of the community. Fostering children was one means of promoting these communal values and ensuring the likelihood of co-operative interaction. Unlike contemporary American fostered children, African fostered children were usually not orphans nor were their parents unwilling or unable to care for them. Fostering was a means of minimizing what was often viewed as a dysfunctional emphasis on individualism within a communal setting. It was a means of diffusing children's primary relationships to larger numbers of people within the extended family and the community. It was also a means of relieving individual women of some of the responsibilities involved with nurturing and child care.

Although enslaved West Africans were obviously unable to replicate traditional family and communal patterns and values in the new world, some traditions, including the emphasis on the interconnectedness and interdependence of communities, appear to have been adapted within the enslaved communities as a means of coping with slavery's highly destructive system of exploitation and oppression (Gutman, 1976).

Defined and treated as chattels, enslaved African-Americans were not entitled to the right to establish families in either the westernized or African sense. The public/private dichotomy of gendered activities so often characteristic of western societies was neither encouraged nor supported within enslaved African-American families. While enslaved women were largely responsible for child care and such household maintenance chores as cooking and cleaning in the cabins of the slave quarters, both enslaved males and females were expected to be economically productive for their "owners" (Davis, 1981, 1983) with women being constrained to toil alongside men in cruel parodies of equal opportunity employment.

Marriage between enslaved African-Americans usually existed at the whim of the master and could be severely damaged, if not effectively destroyed, through the sale of a partner. Women were also subjected to sadistic forms of sexual harassment and appropriation, such as rape by white males. In the meantime, African-American males were not allowed to protect or provide for their families in the ways in which white males were expected to. Thus enslaved families were often characterized by high degrees of instability. Whatever stability did exist often developed out of a mother's relationship to her children rather than from her relationship to her husband. In other words, the nurturance provided for enslaved children was primarily provided by already overburdened enslaved women (White, 1985; Jones, 1986).

If enslaved children were orphaned through the death or sale of their parents, other women within the quarters often assumed the additional responsibility for their care. Thus the African tradition of fostering was adapted to meet the needs of the enslaved community in the USA (Gutman, 1976; Sudarkasa, 1988) and has since become known as othermothering. This practice of othermothering continues to this day to play a critical role in the African-American community.

African-American patterns of mothering and othermothering have in turn stimulated what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children . . . [and treat them] as if they were members of their own families" (Collins, 1987: 5). Sometimes it is recognized that many people within a community are experiencing the same or similar problems which may only be responsive to collective action. At that point, women who may have informally "apprenticed" as othermothers might deem it necessary to assume the role of "community othermother" to remedy the situation.

The status of community othermother is bestowed upon women who are often over 40 years of age, not only because over time they have exhibited the ethic of care so critical to the survival and well-being of their communities, but also because they have lived long enough to have a sense of the community's tradition and culture. Typically, the
woman's behavior as a mother and/or othermother has been exemplary
and she is considered to be wise. Commanding a powerful position of
respect as a result of these characteristics, the community othermother
was/is able successfully to critique the behavior of individual members of
the community and to provide them with directions on appropriate
behavior(s). Based upon her knowledge and her respected position, a
community othermother is also in a position to provide analyses and/or
critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well-being of her
community. Whenever necessary, she serves as a catalyst in the develop-
ment and implementation of strategies designed to remedy these harm-
ful conditions.

It should be noted that othermothering does have the potential for
controversy because community othermothers do occupy political space
within a community. If for some reason the community is not in agree-
ment about the role, possibilities and privileges of othermothers, tension
may arise as that space is contested, and negotiations may be necessary to
accommodate both sides. These kinds of activities call into question
popular notions of African-American women as profoundly powerless
victims – for a number of reasons a troubling characterization which will
be examined below.

African-American mothers, othermothers and community other-
mothers have frequently labored in obscurity, although some, including
Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Septima Clark and Fannie Lou
Hamer, have achieved a certain degree of national recognition. Among
those community othermothers who have not received the attention they
deserve are Daisy Bates, who led the struggle to integrate the public
schools of Little Rock, Arkansas in the mid-1950s, and Ella Baker, a
community organizer who was active in several major civil rights organi-
sations for over thirty years. The lives of each of these women illustrate
how one's resources can be utilized to intervene in situations in a manner
that fosters change.

Daisy Bates and her husband L. C. Bates were owners and publishers
of the weekly newspaper the State Press. They were also prominent and
active members of the National Association for the Advancement of
Colored People (NAACP). The leadership role assumed by Daisy Bates
especially resonates with a strong mothering or nurturing theme. The
Bates home became the daily meeting place for the Little Rock Nine –
the Black teenagers chosen to integrate Little Rock's Central High
School. In the morning parents brought their children to the Bates
home so that they could prepare to face the mobs that surrounded
Central High School during the early part of the school year and the
dangerous hostile environment that existed within the school through-
out the year. Afterwards, the children would return to her home to
discuss the day's events, develop coping strategies, do their homework

and eat a snack. Thus the Bates home became a haven in which the
psychological and emotional nurturance of the children, so critical to
their survival and to the success of the struggle, could occur in safety.
Later the children's parents would retrieve them from the Bates home
only to return them the next day to repeat the process.

As a result of these activities, both Daisy and L. C. Bates were sub-
jected to a variety of terroristic harassment. Daisy Bates regularly
received threatening phone calls; rocks and bombs were hurled through
their windows; shots were fired at their home; and the Ku-Clux-Klan
burned crosses in their yard. Daisy Bates was arrested three times, and
she and her husband witnessed the demise of their newspaper as a result
of a financial boycott by their advertisers (Bates, 1962).

Despite these efforts to silence her, Bates never lost her belief in the
legitimacy of the struggle. In The Long Shadow of Little Rock Bates writes:

L. C. and I have committed our lives to this crusade [for equality].
Together we continue to take an active part in the fight for the
emancipation of the Negro in the South. . . . Together we look to
the time when the citizens of this land will erase the shame of Little
Rock, when the Constitution of the United State will embrace every
man regardless of his color, when brotherhood will be more than a
mere topic for an annual church sermon.

(Bates, 1962: 225)

Ella Baker serves as the second example of a person who assumed
the roles of othermother and community othermother. Baker's activ-
ism, like that of many othermothers and community othermothers,
developed out of her childhood socialization to accept responsibility
for the "uplift of the race" through care of other less fortunate indi-
viduals within the family and the community. Thus as an adult she was
prepared to assume the role of othermother when the need arose for
her to adopt and raise a niece – although she had no biological chil-
dren of her own.

Baker's role as a community othermother began in 1938 when she
joined the NAACP and began traveling throughout the South to recruit
membership – an extremely dangerous undertaking at the time. Later
she served as a kind of political midwife at the births of the Southern
Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent
Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1950s and 1960s. It was Baker
who insisted that the spirit and momentum of the Montgomery Bus
Boycott could not be allowed to dissipate. She along with others includ-
ing Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison encouraged Martin Luther King
to establish SCLC. Baker went on to serve (reluctantly) as its first acting
director while its board searched for a male minister to become the
organization's administrator. She later agreed to return to that position
with a cut in pay – when the male who was eventually hired was unable to discharge his duties in a satisfactory manner.

Baker’s willingness to return to this position illustrates the kind of gender-based tension that could arise between community othermothers and their community. Although she recognized the inherent patriarchy of the SCLC as exemplified by the pay cut, she was willing to accommodate them so long as she was able to “keep her eyes on the prize” (to paraphrase an old Negro spiritual).

Galvanized by the spread of the sit-in movement across the South in the early 1960s, Baker encouraged students in a number of ways that included getting SCLC to support a conference for student activists which eventually led to the establishment of SNCC. As she had done for SCLC, Baker went to work with SNCC to help them establish their organization. She was also one of the guiding forces behind the emergence of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) – an organization which would later challenge Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party. That challenge wrought fundamental changes in Democratic party rules on such critical issues as the delegate selection process. These efforts to foster inclusion of diverse voices would eventually result in the capacity of Jesse Jackson to mount a viable campaign for the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

It is only recently that Baker’s story has been retrieved from history, and from that retrieval process a picture of Baker is emerging as “a wise woman, an elder, a calming force who could bring clarity to issues and [who] was respected” (Payne, 1989; Cantarow, 1980).

Baker was especially cognizant of the necessity to develop effective models for social change with the available resources. Suspicious of dependency on individual forms of charismatic leadership, Baker envisioned the development of alternative forms of leadership that were group centered. Thus her energies were focused on devising strategies that would enhance people’s self-sufficiency while at the same time developing the kind of leaders who were skillful in dealing “non-destructively with their own need for recognition” (Payne, 1989). Long years of experience in these various social change organizations as a community organizer convinced Baker that social change resulted from tedious, painstaking work and was best accomplished from within the community by members of the community. Thus her leadership/teaching style, which she characterized as facilitative, was designed to nurture individual growth and empower community people to assume responsibility for the mundane tasks that would foster social change (Payne, 1989; Cantarow, 1980).

African-American history has been most often characterized by two major themes – the struggle to survive at the margin of society under hostile conditions, and the related struggle to change society into a more hospitable and inclusive environment. These struggles have been waged with minimal access to the usual resources generally associated with traditional concepts of power such as control of the distribution of society’s resources, and command of its wealth, armed forces and mass media. At the same time, as previously mentioned, African-American women have often been characterized as profoundly powerless victims of the multiple oppression of gender, race and class. However, as Mamphela Ramphela has noted, the victim image is “ultimately disempowering . . . because it denies human agency in history which is inherent in the very essence of our humanity.” She goes on to warn that “Projecting people as helpless victims patronizes and paralyzes them and it promoting the image of the oppressor as ‘invincible’ in relation to their own ‘powerlessness’” (Ramphela, 1990: 14).

Power has frequently been described vaguely as something very real, possessed by an individual or group, who may or may not choose to use it (Barnes, 1988: 59). It has also been assumed that the possession of power by one actor or agent either diminishes or precludes its possession by another (Ramphela, 1990: 14). Ramphela challenges this position and argues that power should be perceived as the “use of resources of whatever kind to secure outcomes, power then becomes an element of action, and refers to a range of interventions of which an agent is capable” (ibid.).

Because of their lack of access to traditional sources of power, especially those mentioned above, African-Americans have had to rely on their abilities to develop power out of nontraditional resources and forms of intervention. Historically othermothering and community othermothering have been crucial to the survival of Black communities. Not only have forms of othermothering nurtured and sustained African-American communities, but they were also powerful nontraditional resources utilized to intervene creatively in situations or conditions that threatened the survival of the community. Thus they exemplify Ramphela’s conceptualization of power as a range of interventions that achieve outcome and should be viewed as potentially effective agencies for social transformation.

Contemporary African-American communities must continue to struggle around the dual themes of survival and social change while also confronting such critical problems as drug addiction, gang-related violence, the AIDS epidemic, rising numbers of hate crimes, depression and unemployment, and concerted attacks on hard-won civil rights legislation and affirmative action policies. These and other problems not only threaten the survival of the African-American community in the twenty-first century, but may also foster disempowering feelings of impotence.

The development of an understanding of othermothering and community othermothering is useful in a number of ways. First it is helpful
in dispelling feelings of impotence through illustrating historical non-traditional patterns of empowerment for Black women. Second through examining the activism of such women as Daisy Bates and Ella Baker emphasis is placed on the conceptualization of power as a verb as opposed to a noun. Finally the abilities to analyze, critique and strategize around issues developed through community othermothering are critical resources that can and should be creatively utilized to address contemporary needs. This in turn becomes what R. J. B. Walker refers to as a “transformative assault . . . that carr[jes] the possibility of reconstructing the conditions for a decent life from the bottom up” (Walker, 1988: 8).

NOTES
1 Carol B. Stack describes fictive kin as friends who assume the responsibilities of kinsmen and are given a fictive kin term. See Stack, 1974: 60.
2 The terms African-American, Afro-American and Black American will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter.
3 For example, Nancy Chodorow has defined mothering as tasks performed primarily by biological mothers within a nuclear family setting, which include the bearing, nurturing and socializing of children. She argues that the mothering role bears a major burden for the production and reproduction of dichotomous gender differences, and also serves to perpetuate and reinforce the relative powerlessness of women within society. See Chodorow, 1978: 31.
4 It is interesting to note that after a woman had discharged her responsibilities for the maintenance of her family any remaining profits belonged to her, to do with as she pleased – without accounting to her husband.
5 In “Reflections on the Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves” Angela Davis has pointed out that enslaved women were expected to be not only economically productive but reproductive as well. See Davis, 1981: 2–15.
6 For a discussion of these various forms of mothering see, for example, the articles by Rosalie Riegel Troester (1984) and Gloria Joseph (1984) in SAGE: A Scholarly Journal of Black Women. See also Patricia Hill Collins, 1987 and 1990.
7 For an important discussion on a parallel conceptualization to community othermothering see Bernice Johnson Reagon, 1989: 167–80.
8 Telephone interview by the author with Zoharah Simmons (formerly Gwen Robinson), a Mississippi Project Director in SNCC during the 1960s, May 22, 1988, Philadelphia, PA.

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EXPLORING THE WPA NARRATIVES

Finding the voices of Black women and men

Melvina Johnson Young

PREFACE

I was born in 1963 and raised in the segregated South. The first words that I learned to read were “colored” and “whites only.” But, long after these words disappeared from over doorways of restaurants, movie houses, restrooms, etc., I, even as a small Black child, knew that I was still not to step inside those doors. The attitudes of the white people of my small rural hometown were more than enough to keep us out even if the Federal government said that we were equal and free to do as we pleased.

Life in the small cotton-farming community was pleasant enough as long as we stayed in our part of town and didn’t get “out of our places” as Negroes. We did not. I grew up watching young white children, younger than myself, ordering my grandparents about and calling them by their first names. This last was the epitome of disrespect in Black culture. But my grandparents simply laughed it off behind the white folks’ backs, explaining that white children were quite ill-bred. They told us not to worry about it. They also warned us to never try it or we would live to regret it. It was simply axiomatic of Black life, especially in the South, that you did not reveal your true self to white people because if they did not like what they saw, they had a very real power to harm you.

Therefore, when I began to read the Work Progress Administration (WPA) ex-slave interviews, I realized that many of them sounded the way my grandparents had sounded when they talked to white people – polite, guarded and evasive. Further, the interviews did not sound very much like the things that my elders had told me about slavery. None of my foremothers had ever told me that, to them, slavery represented “the good old days” or that field work was “fun.” Since I had spent every summer since I was 8 years old chopping cotton, I knew better anyway.

So then it became important to me to find out who the interviewers of the ex-slaves were. Why were Black women and men saying the things