SISTERS
in the
WILDERNESS

Chapter 2

TENSIONS IN MOTHERHOOD: FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

LIKE HAGAR'S STORY, African-American women's story has been closely associated with motherhood. Sociologists La-Frances Rogers Rose and Joyce Ladner claim that the social and economic significance of motherhood in Africa did not lose its importance when African women were brought to America and enslaved. The close bond between black women and children that existed in Africa was reinforced in the slavocracy. Many slave women were left alone to nurture their offspring because the fathers lived on other plantations or were used as "studs" to father a host of other children – or the father was the slave holder, who did not claim his black children. Slave mothers worked in the fields and were often hired out in other capacities if they were city slaves. Yet they often simultaneously nursed and nurtured their children. In parts of Africa mothers were market women, earning their own living and simultaneously nurturing their children. Thus many African women and African-American female slaves had a long heritage of public and private functions associated with motherhood. All of this African-derived female knowledge was useful in the slavocracy. Slave women could nurse and nurture their own children and also "mammy" the slave master's children.

One should not assume, however, that African-American

women's history is an immediate and unaltered link with an African traditional past. From the beginning of her history in North America, the black woman was controlled by a host of alien social and political forces. Anglo-American social and family demands controlled her life during slavery. African-American social, political and family needs shaped her life after slavery into the present. Hence, in the course of her long history in America, the black woman has often found herself trapped in a mesh of cultural redefinitions, role exploitation and black male-female crises that have seriously affected her well-being.[1] Whatever her role as mother and nurturer in Africa, the new world of American slavery adjusted it to meet American institutional needs at the time.

Yet there is no denying that black women's roles as mothers and nurturers have been important for the development of institutional life in both the Anglo and the African-American communities. Attempts to understand social life in the African-American community must take seriously the history of the black woman's motherhood roles, which were institutionalized in the slavocracy as "mammy"[2] and were later redeemed from negative connotations and reinstitutionalized in some African-American denominational churches as "mothers of the church." Mammies had considerable authority in the context of white family life in the antebellum South. Mothers of the church were not only powerful figures in the church. They were also greatly respected and had considerable power in the communities in which they lived.[3]

From antebellum time in North America until the present, African-American literary history has revealed the importance of black mothers for the development of community life. It has also shown how black mothers used religion to support themselves emotionally, psychologically and spiritually when they were exploited first by the white world and later by some members of the black community. After the Civil War, some African-American literary history began to suggest that certain religious customs practiced by black mothers and nurturers during slavery caused problems for the kind of social change necessary in the African-American community following emancipation.

But in the lyrics of some African-American spiritual songs – created during slavery – women's roles are associated with

birthing and nurturing functions in a positive way. One encounters lines celebrating "Mary had a baby," and that "Mary and Martha feed my lambs, feed my lambs." Of the one hundred and thirty spiritual songs in the Ballanta Taylor collection published in 1925, twenty-three songs contain positive references to mother. Five contain references to Mary "who had a baby" and to Mary and Martha. On the whole, then, spiritual songs project a positive image of women as helpful and caring mothers and nurturers. In these documents of slave culture there is no suggestion of conflict in the community about how black women's mothering and nurturing roles ought to function.

Like the spiritual songs, many slave narratives describe black mothers and nurturers burdened by a system of bondage. Unlike the spiritual songs, the narratives tell how the relation between slave owners and slave women was exploitative and affected the well-being of slave mothers. Linda Brent's slave narrative describes her Aunt Nancy, a slave woman, caught in the conflict between white and black demands upon her mothering and nurturing roles. The relation between the slave-owner's wife and the slave woman is, like Sarah's and Hagar's relation, built upon the exploitation of the slave woman's body and labor. Brent reports that her Aunt Nancy

> had always slept on the floor in the entry near Mrs. Flint's chamber door that she might be within call. When she married she was told she might have the use of a small room in an outhouse. . . . Mrs. Flint . . . was expecting to be a mother, and if she should want a drink of water in the night, what could she do without her slave to bring it? So my aunt was compelled to lie at the door, until one midnight she was forced to leave, to give premature birth to a child. In a fortnight she was required to resume her place on the entry floor because Mrs. Flint's baby needed her attentions. She kept her station there through the summer and winter, until she had given premature birth to six children, all of whom died.[4]

In another narrative an old slave woman tells of her aunt's exploitation as a "breeder woman" for a white slave owner. This breeder woman was forced to birth children for the slavocracy every twelve months.[5]

Yet slave mothers were dedicated to the care of their young ones. Even the labor practices of the slavocracy did not interfere with the mothering and nurturing functions of some antebellum black women. Charles Ball, a slave writing in 1836, tells of slave mothers nursing their babies as they worked in the fields. One slave woman fastened her child to her body in a crude knapsack as she worked in the fields, and "in this way carried [her baby] all day and performed her task at the hoe with the other people."[6]

Apparently great strength was required of the slave mother. This strength was manifested not only by her ability to perform the difficult tasks associated with her mothering and nurturing roles. Strength was also manifested in her ability to endure and to gain victory over the suffering and pain often accompanying these tasks. That this endurance and victory were directly related to the mother's dependence upon God and religious faith is revealed in both spiritual songs and slave narratives. There are these lines from a spiritual that declare

> O yonder's my old mudder been a-waggin at de hill so long,
> It's about time she cross over, Get home bime-by, Keep prayin' I do believe.[7]
>
> My mother died with a staff in her hand, She had so much trouble in this land, But she held on to God's hand.[8]
>
> I wonder were my mudder deh, See my mudder on de rock gwine home on de rock gwine home in Jesus' name.[9]

Linda Brent's narrative shows how the slave mother's religion shaped her relationships with her children and other people in the slavocracy. Brent tells of her grandmother's untiring efforts to purchase the freedom of her children and of the grandmother's belief that God supported her efforts.[10] She tells of her grandmother's ordeal of witnessing the death of her last surviving daughter and of the supportive role played by her religion and faith:

> My grandmother was summoned to the bedside of this, her last remaining daughter. She was very ill, and they said she would die. Grandmother had not entered Dr. Flint's [the daughter's owner's] house for several years. They had

> treated her cruelly.... At last Uncle Philip came into the house. I heard someone inquire, "How is she?" and he answered, "She is dead."... He whispered, "Linda, she died happy... don't add to my poor mother's trouble."... Ah, yes, that blessed old grandmother.... She... had borne the pelting storms of a slave mother's life.... She has always been strong to bear, and now, as ever, religious faith supported her.... That poor back was fitted to its burden. It bent under it, but it did not break.[11]

Another slave describes a mother's use of religious ritual as she tries to rear him. He says that he and his mother were close. She taught him to pray and how to survive because she feared that he would be sold or that she would be sold. She spent much time in prayer and she always asked God to take care of him.[12]

One of the most moving personal testimonies came from Sojourner Truth. At a women's rights convention in 1851, in Ohio, she told of her reliance upon Jesus to support her as she bore the pain connected with being a slave mother:

> Dat man ober dar [a white clergyman on the rostrum] say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place everywhar. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or ober mud puddles, or give me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at my arms! I have ploughed, and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?... I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?[13]

Apparently the roles of slave mothers and nurturers were determined more by the institutions of slavery than by the internal demands of the slave community. Their roles were fixed. They were primarily to labor, reproduce and nurture. But mothering and nurturing tasks could range from birthing children to breastfeeding white children, to caring for the family needs of the master and his household, to tending to children as she worked in the fields, to protecting the lives of hundred of slaves she helped escape from slavery to freedom (as did Harriet Tubman).

The American slavocracy was an all-compassing legal, political and economic system that affected every relationship in the slave community. Therefore the social process in the antebellum slave community turned black motherhood into something totally different from what was thought to be the model of motherhood in white society. The mothering and nurturing function of the African-American slave woman extended beyond the mere limits of female role activity into areas of control that should have belonged to the black man (according to American standards of male role functioning).

It was the black mother who often protected the children and family as far as they could be protected during slavery.[14] It was a black female nurturer, called Moses by her people, who led regiments and scouted for the Union Army during the American Civil War.[15] Sometimes it was the slave mother who was given permission by the slave master to operate her own business and thereby provide economic security for her children. An ex-slave woman tells the story of her mother, whom her slave master allowed to go into business to support herself and her children. The slave mother had to give her slave master one half of what she earned working in the garrison of Fort Washington, Maryland. There, she "carried on a little business of selling pies, hot coffee, etc., to the marines and exchanging the same for rations." Within three years she was able to buy a horse and wagon to carry her goods to the fort. Her business continued to prosper until the poor white people "became jealous in a body and waited on the major and gave vent to their feelings."[16]

Incorporated, then, within the mothering and nurturing functions of slave women were often the tasks of protecting, providing for, resisting oppression and liberating. All of these tasks suggest strength. But it must be emphasized that strength is not necessarily synonymous with power, nor does it here imply an idea of black matriarchy. Gerda Lerner correctly declares: "The question of black matriarchy is commonly misunderstood. The very term is deceptive, for 'matriarchy' implies the exercise of power by women."[17] The antebellum black mother had no real power. The power above her and her family was the white antebellum slave master and his family. But it is perhaps not too farfetched to suggest that in their struggle to survive and nurture their own, many antebellum black mothers often had as

their helpmate not the black man but black religion. The black male was the lowest in authority in the slave system.[18] Hence black mothers and nurturers depended upon their religion for psychological and emotional support. And black Christian religion became, after the Civil War, greatly dependent upon these black women for its form and sustenance.[19]

In his article "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness," Lawrence Levine hypothesizes that slave religion extended slave consciousness so that "life is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos of the gods."[20] Levine suggests that the slave's response to any situation reflected a spiritual interpretation of reality "un-dichotomized" by separation of the sacred from the secular. And it is probably true, as Bert Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin claim, that slaves used their religion as a fixed psychic point to counter the uncontrollable flux in their social world.[21] This was perhaps true for all slaves.

But in terms of some slave mothers and religion, it also seems that an additional internalization process operated. God and religion fulfilled some very basic needs that could not be fulfilled by the slave community or the black man. Thus the slave narratives often portray black mothers exhibiting a vigorous spiritual self-confidence even though their sexuality has been completely brutalized and exploited by white men of every social class. Though they were continuously raped, used as breeder women and made accessible to the sexual appetite of all white males, many slave mothers endured with strength and dignity. They endured because, as one slave mother taught her daughter, they believed there was "nobody in the wide world to look to but God."[22]

TENSIONS IN THE COMMUNITY OVER MOTHERHOOD

In some African-American literary history following the antebellum period, black writers infer that this kind of God-consciousness and God-dependence supporting black mothers is problematic. They suggest that for some black mothers, this consciousness and dependence created needs that could only be

fulfilled within the limits of the black mother's religion. James Baldwin, an avid student of African-American religion, demonstrated this in a scene in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk.* Here, a black Christian woman can only make love to her husband by psychologically substituting God for the husband. Thus the woman's pillow talk is also her god-talk, from which the husband is excluded.

Postbellum black writers were trying to present the black woman's mothering and nurturing roles in relation to the transformative social processes occurring in the black community after the Civil War. Especially important was the process of strengthening the black male's role as father and giving him uncontested authority over black family life. During slavery this control had been exercised first by the slave master and his family and next by the slave woman.

In the newly freed African-American community, this business of transferring authority to the black male represented a process of translating power in the ex-slave community into a more stable patriarchal model. There are indications that even before the Civil War the institutionalization of black religion into various forms like African Methodist Episcopal carried with it the subordination and oppression of women. The following testimonies of black mothering and nurturing figures Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart and Old Elizabeth show how sexism accompanied the practice and understanding of institutional religion in the black community during and directly after the antebellum period in North America:

> JARENA LEE: I went to see the preacher in charge of the African society . . . the Rev. Richard Allen . . . to tell him that I felt it my duty to preach the gospel. . . . He then replied, that a Mrs. Cook, a Methodist lady, had also some time before requested the same privilege. . . . But as to preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it – that it did not call for women preachers. . . .
>
> On second day morning, I took a stage and rode seven miles to Woodstown, and there I spoke to a respectable congregation of white and colored, in a school house. I was desired to speak in the colored meeting house, but the minister could not reconcile his mind to a woman preacher – he

could not unite in fellowship with me even to shaking hands as Christians ought.[23]

MARIA STEWART: What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother and a judge in Israel? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? . . . I say if such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished, then brethren . . . that God at this eventful period should rise up your own females to strive by their example both in public and private to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us [women] at present.[24]

ELIZABETH: Our meeting gave great offense, and we were forbid holding any more assemblies. Even the elders of our meeting joined with the wicked people, and said such meetings must be stopped, and that women quieted. . . . The persecution against me increased, and a complaint was carried forward . . . and the elders came out with indignation for my holding meetings contrary to discipline – being a woman.[25]

In the development of African-American musical and literary history, it is in blues art that the process of power transferal from female to male begins to show itself. Some blues artists, consciously or unconsciously, diminish the reflection of the black woman's God-consciousness and God-dependence in relation to her role as mother and nurturer. She is often pictured as completely dependent upon the quality of male-female relationships for the emotional and spiritual support she needs. Neither her religion nor her God is mentioned in a substantial way. And her mothering and nurturing function reflected in blues art had less to do with children and more to do with the care and love for black men.

"MAMMA-BABY" IN BLUES LITERATURE

Emerging shortly after the Civil War during the reconstruction period, the lyrics to many blues songs often present black

women in conflicting roles as mamma and baby simultaneously. Reflecting an ambivalence about mothering roles, the blues lyrics diminish the independent strength of mothers and portray weakened female figures. Consider the following blues songs:

SONG #1

Hey, Hey, Mamma, Baby, what's the matter now?
Hey, Mamma, Baby, what's the matter now?

SONG #2

Lord, I'm going away now,
I'm going away to stay,
Lord, I'm going away now,
I'm going away now,
I'm going away to stay!
Be all right, pretty Mamma
Might need my help some day . . .
Baby, bring me a cold towel
For my head, my aching head.[26]

SONG #3

. . . and the sun going down, . . .
dark gone catch me here.
Uumh, oh dark gone catch me here.
I haven't got no loving sweet woman,
that love will be near . . .
Lord, that I'm standing at the crossroads,
Babe, I believe I'm sinking down.[27]

There are many more lines in blues songs that portray this ambiguous admixture of the roles of mamma-woman-baby in relation to the black woman: "Black woman, black woman, baby, you know you paid your dues"; "Blues in the bottle . . . I've got the stopper in my hand sweet mamma"; "I got holes in my pockets baby, I got patches in my pants, I'm behind with the house-rent, mamma, Lord."[28] All lines portray a weakened "mamma."

Some of the blues poetry of Langston Hughes provides a very clear view of the blues artist reshaping the image of the black woman's mothering and nurturing roles. In his *Se-*

lected Poems, the section entitled "Shadow of the Blues" has a poem, "Sylvester's Dying Bed," which demonstrates this reshaping process:

(stanza 1) I woke up this mornin'
'Bout half-past three.
All the womens in town
Was gathered 'round me.

(stanza 2) Sweet gals was a-moanin'
"Sylvester's gonna die!"
And a hundred pretty mammas
Bowed their heads to cry.

. . . . . .

(stanza 4) Black gals was a-beggin,
"You can't leave us here!"
Brown-skins crying, "Daddy!
Honey, Baby! Don't go, dear!"

(stanza 5) But I felt ma time's a-comin',
And I know'd I's dyin' fast.
I seed the River Jerden
A-creepin' muddy past –
But I's still Sweet Papa 'Vester,
Yes, Sir! Long as life do last!

(stanza 6) So I hollers, "com'ere, babies,
Fo' to love you daddy right!"
And I reaches up to hug 'em –
When the lawd put out the light.[29]

Throughout the poem there is a conflict in the male/female imagery that is finally resolved in the assertion of masculine dominance and female dependency. Initially the females are referred to as "womens," an adult female designation. But in stanza two the "womens" become "sweet gals" – thereby infusing the adult image with an element of adolescence. In line three of stanza two, however, the black females become the stronger, more basic figures of "pretty mammas" – suggesting reproduction and nurturing. Then, in stanza six all images of the females in the poem collapse into the final image of "babies" – implying utter

dependence. But the development of the male imagery in the poem involves only two steps: from the contradictions expressed in stanza four (that is, "Daddy" and "baby") to the single authority of "Papa 'Vester" in stanza five and "daddy" in stanza six.

Whereas the black woman in some blues art is still "mamma," she is no longer "mamma" like the Rock of Gibraltar. She is "mamma" with a certain dependency, like a baby. Though her suffering prevails, the black woman in blues art has not the uncanny spiritual and emotional endurance of her literary progenitor, the antebellum slave mother. The blues woman is only human, supported by neither God nor man. She merely "hangs her head and cries" in the face of trouble while her man may "take a train and ride" to escape it. The fact that most blues art does not associate the black woman's mothering and nurturing role with religion (as do some of the lyrics of the spiritual songs and many of the slave narratives) diminishes her characteristic strength, which she believed came from God through her religious faith. When blues artists de-emphasized religion, they not only lessened the importance of the mothering and nurturing function of the black woman, but they also directed attention away from the exploitation of these roles by forces inside and beyond the postbellum black community.[30]

The works of some postbellum black protest novelists and dramatists advance the blues artists' trend of casting aspersions on the effect of the black mother's religion upon the performance of her mothering and nurturing tasks. But contrary to the blues artists, some of the postbellum protest writers show black mothers depending very much upon the African-American denominational churches, the black preacher and black religion to support their mothering and nurturing roles. However, the protest writers criticize this relation. They question the compatibility of the black mother's religion with the demands a complex urban world makes upon her. Unlike the blues artists, writers James Baldwin and Richard Wright stage their protest about the relation of the black mother to religious phenomena on a much more sophisticated sociological level. Both men agree that the black mother's church religion (mediated by the black preacher) has made her oblivious to the real needs of black people and to the destructive nature of the social, political and legal forces governing black life in white America.

BLACK MAMMA, BLACK PREACHER, BLACK PROTEST

In his play *Amen Corner,* James Baldwin creates a black mother character who consciously rejects her black husband as she selects black religion to help her perform her mothering and nurturing tasks.[31] The results are, of course, disastrous for the family. The father dies destitute and unhappy, having been deprived of his place in the family because of the mother's call to preach. The son goes out into the world as a musician to find his black manhood, which his mother had tried to smother in the obligation of a forced religious commitment. Baldwin believes black mothers hold fast to religion for psychological, emotional and physical security black men cannot or will not provide.[32] According to Baldwin, the instability of her family and socioeconomic condition, the corrupt elements in her black urban community and white oppression cause the black mother to develop an "unnatural" dependency upon religion. This dependency renders her extremely vulnerable before the religious authority in the black church or exalts her to a position of religious authority through which she exploits other people.

An important point to recognize about some protest writers' portrayal of the black mother in relation to religious phenomena is that Christian religion does not often play a supportive, productive role. In his novel *The Long Dream,* Richard Wright reveals the great degree to which a black preacher and his theology are indifferent to the suffering of black mothers. First Wright presents a black mother questioning God following the lynching of her son Chris and the mutilation of his body by the white lynchers:

> "Chris, baby, this ain't you! Now, naw, God! This can't be." Mrs Sims cried, clinging hysterically to the dead body. "Gawd didn't do this to me! He couldn't! And you got to do something to stop this from happening to black women's children.... Gawd, take your sun out of the sky! Take your stars away! I don't want Your trees, Your flowers no more! I don't want Your wind to blow on me when my son can die like this.... I'm standing 'fore Your throne asking You to tell me: What did I ever do wrong? Where's my sin?... Gawd, talk to me. As long's I live, I'll be asking You to tell me why my son died like this."[33]

Then Wright presents the black preachers' response to the incident:

> In Fishbelly's [the protagonist] Black-Belt living the echoes of Chris's death died slowly away. From pulpits, sweating black preachers thundered cryptic sermons describing all death as the work of God's mysterious Hand meting out divine justice to the earth's sinful inhabitants.[34]

In some of his fiction Richard Wright suggests the Christian religion has failed to meet the black mother's needs because it has confounded her understanding of black suffering and has caused her to accept untenable explanations for it. She, in turn, tries to pass these ineffective explanations to her children as tools for dealing with white oppression.

Richard Wright's major protest, then, is against the black mother's dependence upon Christian religion for support in her mothering and nurturing roles. He suggests that this religion exploits her intellect by stunting the growth of her critical faculties, thereby limiting the action she can choose to alter her family's oppression. The black preacher's contribution to all of this is that his theology bears a relationship with the social forces that oppress the black woman and the black community. This is clearly revealed in that section of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* where the black preacher visits the main character, Bigger Thomas, who is in jail accused of murdering a young, rich, white woman. In order to communicate the degree to which this religion (via the black preacher) has subjugated the black mother, Wright establishes the following sequence in one passage. First, Bigger, seeing the black minister before him in his jail cell, makes a mental association:

> He was... Reverend Hammond, the pastor of his mother's church. He feared that the preacher would make him feel remorseful. He wanted him to go; but so closely associated in his mind was the man with his mother and what she stood for that he could not speak.[35]

Bigger attempted to direct his hearing away from the preacher's exhortations, for Bigger "knew without listening what they

meant; it was the old voice of his mother telling of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world."[36] And the preacher's words reinforce Bigger's premonitions: "Fergit ever' thing but yo' soul son. Take yo' mind off ever' thing but eternal life.... Fergit yuh's black. Gawd looks past yo' skin 'n inter yo' soul, son."[37] The preacher begins a long sermon about the creation not knowing that Bigger, in his mind, has already "killed" the creation story. Richard Wright tells the reader that those who wanted to kill Bigger thought that he was not human, that he was not "included in the picture of creation; and that was why he [Bigger] had killed it." Wright says that in order for Bigger to live he had to create a new world for himself, and for that he was to die.[38] Bigger's mother can endure struggling and suffering because the preacher had defined these as prerequisites for Christian salvation. The preacher says to Bigger:

> Look son Ah'm holdin' in mah hands a wooden cross taken from a tree. A tree is the worl' son. 'N nailed t' this tree is a sufferin' man. Th's whut life is, son. Sufferin. How kin yuh keep from b'lievin' the word of Gawd when Ah'm holdin' befo' yo' eyes the only thing tha' gives a meanin' t' yo' life?[39]

These "Christian philosophies" make possible the action of Bigger's mother in his jail cell – an action that disgusts Bigger and causes him to loathe himself and her. She crawls around on her knees in his cell, going from "white racist to white racist" begging them to spare the life of her son. Her religion does not allow her to see that her son has decided that if he must die, he will die like a man. This is the point of Richard Wright's stringent critique of the black-mother–black-preacher–Christian-religion relationship. This religion, with the help of the black preacher, has blinded the black mother to such an extent that she can neither value nor recognize the tensions inherent in the expression of black manhood. Apparently Baldwin and Wright are in partial agreement here, though Baldwin pays more attention to the fanatical aspect of black religion and how it oppresses both women and men.

Wright and Baldwin, in part, build their images of the black mother upon the foundations laid by both antebellum and postbellum blues writers. The antebellum image of black motherhood yielded the "strong black mamma," capable of uncanny endurance and dignity because of her faith in the effectiveness of her religion. The postbellum blues artist presented an image of the black woman (without religious faith or involvement) that emphasized the dependency and weakness of the black mother vulnerable before a host of emotional, economic, domestic and social crises. Baldwin and Wright, on the other hand, merge the two images (antebellum and blues) into one – but with an important difference. Though their female characters are absorbed in their mothering and nurturing roles, though they are dependent upon religion, they are exploited by this religion and by some black preachers. This experience makes these women inept in dealing with oppression. Richard Wright, more than Baldwin, raises serious theological questions about the Christian religion in relation to black mothers' and black people's experience of racial oppression in America. Wright raises the theodicy question of why a good God lets innocent people suffer along with the guilty.

BLACK WOMEN AUTHORS DIFFER

Some postbellum women writers provide images of black motherhood that are radically different from what their male counterparts (that is, Wright and Baldwin) have projected. Two examples are Margaret Walker and Alice Walker. Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee* reinforces the image of the slave mother, but more detail is added. Alice Walker in her novel *The Color Purple* recasts the image of black motherhood, emphasizing the importance of the development of "SELFconsciousness" and a new spirituality on the part of black mothers. Neither of these two female writers criticizes the function of Christian religion in relation to black mothering and nurturing roles. However, other black women writers like Zora Hurston and Nella Larson (both part of the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s) find fault with the effect some black preachers have upon the lives and roles of black mothers.

Margaret Walker, in *Jubilee* – set in the antebellum South – emphasizes the positive role religion plays in the development of what every African-American slave mother needed, that is, survival intelligence. The endurance of the protagonist Vyry is

assured by the shrewd survival intelligence she developed under the tutelage of Mammy Sukey and Aunt Sally, both mothers and both religious women. One part of this survival intelligence had to do with plantation politics of learning how to be visible and accessible while simultaneously keeping out of the way of Big Missy, the slave-master's cruel wife. A second part had to do with learning how to survive physically on the basis of the correct knowledge of the effects of roots and herbs. The third part of survival intelligence had to do with developing a deep spirituality that provided psychological and emotional support in the time of trouble. The parts were held together by Vyry's God-consciousness and absolute dependence upon God, which allowed her at an early age to understand her life processes in a positive light even though she was a slave. Thus in *Jubilee* Margaret Walker emphasizes an important point about African-American mothers not considered by male blues and protest writers. The concern of many African-American mothers has been for the survival of their children, the family and the race. The economic, spiritual and physical assault upon black life in America by white people and white-controlled institutions has caused the African-American mother to try to develop survival strategies her family can use. She has not always been successful, but she has depended upon her religion to help her develop these strategies and to muster the courage to survive when survival gave no promise.

Often these survival strategies took the form of spiritual values. Black literary critic Mary Burgher describes this reality well when she says that spiritually, black mothers are usually the strongest in the community. They maintain and transmit values and ideas that support and enrich the black community "as a viable unit." Burgher describes these transmitted values as belief in a promised land beyond bondage and oppression; belief that black people have the natural "resourcefulness to find strength in . . . weakness, joy in sorrow and hope in what seems to be despair."[40] Burgher goes on to say that these "values suggest that the black mother . . . sees herself not as a breeder nor as a matriarch but as a builder and nurturer of a race, a nation."[41] In the work of Margaret Walker and many other black women, the image of black motherhood is

> a strong, hard-working woman who does what is necessary . . . to ensure the survival of her children. . . . Although frantic with the defeats that have occurred through the years, the Black mother . . . never quits on you.[42]

Few black male writers have taken seriously the intensity of the black mother's commitment to the survival of her children and her willingness to do what is necessary (including being a mammy, a domestic or stealing food from the white folks) to maintain the life of her offspring. Therefore, some black male writers, such as Richard Wright, portray the black mother as an impediment to the black male's struggle for manhood in America.[43]

Margaret Walker's depiction of Vyry as the "strong black mamma" supported by her religious faith reiterates what slave women's narratives and what some other postbellum black female writers declare about the black mother: "She was the great Black bridge I crossed over on."[44] In accord with this kind of statement, Walker offers an eloquent description of the black mother Vyry, to whom Innis Brown (Vyry's husband) pays tribute:

> She [Vyry] . . . a woman who stood . . . much outrage . . . had a wisdom and a touching humility. . . . It was more than her practical intelligence, or her moral fortitude; more than the fundamental decency and innate dignity. . . . She was touched with a spiritual wholeness. . . . Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins.[45]

Yet, prior to Margaret Walker's time, some black female writers interpreted as problematic some black mothers' relation to black Christian preachers. Zora Hurston and Nella Larson criticized the emotional exploitation of black women by black preachers who hid their exploitative tactics in the submissive theology advocated in their sermons. While Hurston's book *Jonah's Gourd Vine* portrays an intelligent black mother emotionally bedazzled by her philandering preacher husband, Nella Larson in *Quicksand* portrays an octoroon woman rejected by (and reject-

ing) the values of white upper-class culture. Larson's character turns to the religious values of the black community modeled in the black preacher she ultimately marries. Zora Hurston's mother-character Lucy dies leaving a word of advice all black women would do well to heed: "Don't love nobody bettern' yo' self, do you'll be dying before your time is out." Lucy has loved her preacher husband best of all. Nella Larson's mother-character, smothered by religion in the black community, dies burdened and oppressed by excessive childbearing.

Alice Walker represents one of the most able voices of a cadre of modern black women writers who are trying to recast the image of the black mother for the black community.[46] Walker's novel *The Color Purple* does what black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian understands as finding a female voice for mothers so they can tell their own stories realistically.[47] Walker uses feminist issues to shape the situations in which her mother-characters find themselves. Their stories are about domestic violence, rape, racial oppression, the white male exploitation of nature, black sexism, consciousness-raising, sexuality, work, survival and liberation. Because she employs a feminist framework to present the image of African-American mothers, Alice Walker radically recasts both the image of black mothers and the nature of the religious perspectives black mothers need for self-realization. It is this radical recasting of images in a feminist mode that distinguishes Walker's work from that of the other writers considered in this study.

Alice Walker begins *The Color Purple* not by introducing a strong black mamma. Rather she introduces the reader to a vulnerable woman-child plagued by domestic violence in the home of her parents and later in the home of her husband. Fourteen-year-old Celie has been raped by her stepfather. Because she knows very little about how her body functions, she is surprised when she gives birth to children by him. After giving her children away, Celie's stepfather forces her to marry Mr. Albert, who beats her constantly because he believes "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound beating."[48]

Like the blues artists, Alice Walker does not emphasize women's roles as mothers and nurturers of children. Though every major female character in the book is a mother, none has

the responsibility of rearing her biological offspring. Unlike blues artists, Alice Walker wants us to recognize that the inordinate demands men make upon the nurturing capacities of black mothers are destructive for women (for example, Mr. Albert's demands upon Celie, and Harpo's demands upon Sophia). Walker's work suggests that the exertion of male power to make sure women meet these demands constitutes sexism in the black community.

From the beginning of the novel this sexism is in place. The exploitation of black women's sexuality occurs throughout the book. The bodies of the mothers become targets for the gratification of male lust. Nettie's rape by her stepfather is prevented because Celie offers her own body instead. Mr. Albert, Celie's husband, expels Nettie from their house because she refuses his advances. Men have been so brutally intent upon their own gratification in their sexual relations with Celie that she does not discover her body's erotic zones until another woman points them out to her. The white prison warden rationalizes his abuse of the body of (the black woman) Mary Agnes on the grounds that he has indulged in a bit of fornication that "everybody is guilty of."[49]

Freeing the black mothers from debilitating impotence, Alice Walker presents an image of women emerging into self-awareness, power and autonomy. Consciousness-raising; new notions about female sexuality, about God, man and church; new notions about female bonding and women's economic independence are the "tools" Walker uses to move Celie (the main mother-character) from impotence to empowerment. Celie's progress toward empowerment begins when she and the bisexual woman Shug bond in true friendship. Shug is the catalyst causing the changes in Celie's consciousness. She nurtures Celie through the transformations in thinking and action necessary for Celie to become an autonomous woman, taking full responsibility for her own life. Shug guides Celie through her struggle with self-hate and shame to the final realization of her independence as a self-confident lesbian woman.

Shug helps Celie to reexamine certain religious values Celie has held all her life – religious values supporting her bondage rather than her empowerment as a new, liberated woman. This reexamination centers on notions of God, man and church. This reflection shows Celie her image of God as man has limited her

perception of the connectedness of all reality. Shug convinces Celie that church is not a place to find God. Rather, church is a place where people come to share God because "Any God I ever felt in Church I brought in with me... the other folk did too."[50]

Celie's change of consciousness about "God-as-man" frees her psychologically from the fear of her husband, who was as stern as any God she had imagined. After years of silently suffering, Celie "enters into creation."[51] Her revaluing and her departure from her husband's house with Shug liberate her for self-discovery. Shug helps her achieve economic independence. So when Celie returns to Georgia where her husband and his children reside, she is a new woman with a new morality, a new sense of herself and a new financial independence. She has moved from impotence to full autonomy, from self-abasement to self-confidence, from passivity to active responsibility.

Alice Walker's use of feminist issues to structure *The Color Purple* brings a "new word" to talk about black motherhood in African-American literature. Speaking to the community, Walker communicates an inclusive understanding of who is to provide the nurturing for children. Walker portrays mothers (Celie, Shug, Sophia, Mary Agnes) who are separated from their children. But these children are lovingly nurtured by family members and others beyond the family. Jack, Odessa, Harpo and Mary Agnes love and nurture Sophia's children as Sophia serves out her lengthy incarceration. Sophia and Harpo nurture Mary Agnes's child while she seeks a singing career. In the "redistribution" of children, Walker suggests that the nurturing of children is the task of the entire black community – male and female.

Walker also presents an image of black mothers nurturing one another in order to help each other develop self-love and self-esteem. Shug nurtures Celie into a fully responsible moral agent who can take control of her own life and destiny. In her recasting of the image of motherhood, Walker shows the redemptive character of lesbian relationships for some women's lives. Walker also depicts the heterosexual relation between Samuel and Nettie as loving and as productive for both people. Thus Walker suggests that there are loving and nurturing possibilities in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships.

Finally, Walker transforms the character of the religious perceptions the black mothers use to help them in their progress toward self-consciousness and freedom. At the beginning of *The Color Purple,* when Nettie tells Celie "I hate to leave you here with these rotten children [Mr. Albert's children]," Celie answers "Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along."[52] Thus Celie continues her long painful correspondence with God whom she imagines to be old, white and a man. Celie maintains this image of God as long as she nurtures Mr. Albert and his children and works in his fields – as long as she denies herself and possesses a consciousness primarily occupied with self-sacrifice and with surviving the brutality men inflict upon her. As long as she lives in transcendent relation to her own experience, she is content to image God as male, old and white.[53] But when Shug helps Celie begin her process of self-discovery, Celie starts to understand that her notion of God must change, because "you have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a'tall."[54] Thus Celie's God becomes an internal experience rather than a physical manifestation to be worshiped like the man Jesus. Her new understanding of God is similar to that expressed by one of the women in a play by black feminist playwriter Ntozake Shange – the woman who testified "I found god in myself and I love her/fiercely."[55]

That Alice Walker intends to challenge black people to examine their concept of God in relation to liberation is demonstrated by a letter Nettie sends to Celie. After serving almost thirty years as a missionary to the Olinka people in Africa, Nettie says that for her and her husband God is different. God is more spirit and more internal. Most people think God "has to look like something or someone – a roofleaf [the Olinka perception of God] or Christ – but we don't." Nettie claims that "not being tied to what God looks like, frees us."[56]

Walker has tried, in her portrait of black mothers and their transformed religion, to reshape some traditional black understanding of mothering and nurturing roles.[57] Unlike the antebellum black artists, Walker does not present an image of the "strong black mamma" made invulnerable by her faith in God. Rather, she shows black mothers and nurturers vulnerable before a host of destructive domestic and social forces. But unlike blues writers, who also present vulnerable women, Walker does not

suggest that women should deal with these destructive forces by hanging on tighter to men. She suggests that mothers get victory over oppressive social forces by bonding with one another and opposing their oppression rather than "praying 'cause praying was all I know to do."[58]

Unlike the protest writers Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Alice Walker portrays religion as a positive force supporting black mothers in their transformative processes. But she shows that the black mother's religion must move beyond male-female imagery in order to accommodate the black mother's realization of self-esteem, autonomy and liberation. The idea of the divine spirit working within humans is more efficacious for women's development of self-worth than notions of God in male or female form. Like Margaret Walker, Alice Walker does not project an image of a black male preacher exploiting the nurturing capacities of black women. Alice Walker merely gives us Shug's words and Celie's acceptance of them: "You have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a'tall."[59] This statement includes male gods and human men. This is a radical departure from the image of God supporting some of the mothers in the other novels. In the antebellum literature, Wright, Baldwin, Margaret Walker, Nella Larson and Zora Hurston either project or assume images of a traditional male God. But Shug's and Celie's God lives in a feminist faith that abides in the spirit rather than in creeds or in the orthodoxy of institutional religion.

However, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Zora Hurston and Nella Larson would perhaps agree on at least one point – that black women have been devout in their mothering and nurturing tasks. They have believed God supported them in their struggle. Perhaps these writers would also agree that, more often than not, the rank-and-file black woman believes as Celie believed: "Long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along."[60]

MOTHERHOOD IN A CONTEXT OF RESISTANCE

Through black mothering and nurturing depicted in the deposits of African-American culture we see social process in the black community (in both the antebellum and postbellum periods) affected by the God-consciousness and God-dependence of African-American women. Whether positively or negatively assessed by the various artists used in this study, the African-American mother's God-consciousness and absolute dependence upon God provided hope in personal and community relationships where hope seemed absurd. Therefore, systems of bondage like racism and sexism did not bring permanent lethargy to the community.

Black mothers often defied laws and custom in order to nurture black people with care and compassion. Sometimes they suffered severe consequences for this defiance. Historian Benjamin Brawley reports that "in the South any free Negro who entertained a runaway might himself become a slave. Thus in South Carolina in 1827 a free woman with her three children suffered this penalty." Her crime was that "she gave succor to two homeless and fugitive children six and nine years old."[61] For the slave mother, caring for slave children also meant telling the child who her father was even though there were laws against this. The octoroon slave Louisa Picquet shares an incident in which her mother received a penalty for this offense. Owned by John Randolph, this slave mother was fifteen years old when Louisa was born. John Randolph's wife had a child only two weeks older than the slave mother's child Louisa. Randolph was the father of both children. Louisa's mother told Louisa her father was her slave master, John Randolph. For this "offense" of telling the child about her parentage, the slave mother was sold away from her child.[62] Harriet Tubman defied the law in order physically and spiritually to nurture hundreds of black people from bondage in the South to freedom in the North.

Some scholars also make reference to a practice among free black communities during the antebellum period where "free colored men owned their women and children in order that the latter might escape the invidious law against Negroes recently emancipated." The same report tells of the practice among the free people of Northfold, Virginia, where "several women owned their husbands."[63] Slave women did what they could to enhance relationships in the family and community, even if they had to assume what was customarily thought of as "male roles."

During the antebellum period, every person was affected by

the laws, customs and economics of the slavocracy. The well-being of black mothers and nurturers was constantly threatened. But these women often built networks of female support and resistance to aid themselves in whatever tasks they were involved in. Jarena Lee and Old Elizabeth – in their nurturing tasks as preachers – tell of the women who readily opened their houses for women to preach when black male authorities in the churches denied them ordination or use of church buildings. Lee tells of the women who walked with her for ten or even twenty miles to her preaching engagements and to visit the sick. Historian Deborah Gray White, in her treatment of slave women's reality, also speaks of the female slave networks. She claims that "adult female cooperation and interdependence was a fact of female slave life." Further, "The self-reliance and self-sufficiency of slave women, therefore, must not only be viewed in the context of what the individual slave woman did for herself, but what slave women as a group were able to do for one another."[64]

Apparently this kind of networking extended to parenting in the black community during the antebellum era. Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw left their children with other women in the community for extended periods while they traveled through the country preaching the gospel. The children survived and thrived. In the postbellum period this female networking extended into the African-American denominational churches and possibly into later developments like the club movement among black women.

What all this suggests is that the modern phenomenon of black mothers like Rosa Parks acting as catalysts for social change stems from a long tradition of black mothers and nurturers who were catalysts for social change in and beyond the African-American community – even though some social processes in the community restricted black women's opportunities while expanding black men's opportunities. A case in point is the sexism that confronted black women in their effort to become ordained ministers and the lack of restrictions based on sex for black men seeking the same opportunity. This sexism exists today in both the African-American denominational churches and also exists in most of the male theology that issued from the churches after slavery and before the 1980s.

Other structures of domination have had an impact upon the

lives of African-American mothers and nurturers. Surrogacy is one such structure. Hagar and African-American women have a common bond in this surrogacy theme threading through their stories. The following chapter focuses upon the area of African-American women's history where this structure of domination reveals itself.