

Running head: MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS AND OTHERMOTHERS

Mothers, Daughters and Othermothers:
The Significance of Storytelling in Shaping my Identity as an African Woman

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Dedication

To Onyebuchi my light.

To my family, my strength

To my sisters whose rebellious souls have liberated me

To all African women who believe that our stories are too valuable to be silenced

Acknowledgement

I give glory and tribute to God who has given me the strength and courage to persist through to the completion of this thesis despite the many difficulties I confronted in the process.

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I am grateful to my mother for the days I spent with her that filled my girlhood with so many vivid memories. Thank you for teaching me the value of hard work and devotion. In the darkest hours of my journey, I found my way back to your teachings. To my father, thank you for your unending support of my dreams.

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Abstract

My work is not just a story. It is a story of my childhood experiences, perspectives, values, assumptions and beliefs that have shaped my current understanding as a West African woman in and outside of the classroom. My work will examine how stories are rooted in a broad sense of kinship and responsibility, a responsibility to honour my mother, grandmother and othermothers who were my first role models and teachers. I discuss storytelling as a research methodology. My work will also explore the meaning of motherhood in African culture and mother-daughter relationships addressing three primary questions. First, how have competing perspectives about motherhood intersected to produce a distinctly Afrocentric ideology of motherhood? Second, what are the enduring themes that characterize the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood? Finally, what effect might this Afrocentric ideology of motherhood have on African mother-daughter relationship?

CHAPTER I

Sunlight in dark waters

Icy dark water fills my lungs and blood pulsates behind my eyes.

I push my arms and legs, but I can find no leverage

for all I know, I was dragging myself further down.

My breath is agonizingly painful and short

The water seems so dark, so much so it is impossible to see beneath the water

I see a raging wave barreling towards me

It crashes into me and throws my body underneath the water

My lung burns like a hundred needles have been plunged into it

As panic fades into numbness

A shimmer of sunlight breaks through the dark waters

The light shines as steady as the morning sun

Now the water is clear, the air barely moist

I can feel the warmth of sunlight

The struggle is over; I am finally home

My relationship with literature was in some sense a way for me to escape my reality. I sought narratives which reminded me of my lived experience, stories that comforted me in times of misery and I was fascinated, spirited away by these relatable tales of racism, sexism, and misogyny, while walking hand in hand with exceptional African women as they traversed the hurdles placed in front of them with grace and superhuman strength. Each collection of poems, short stories and personal narrative represented in my work makes me think of the “uppity” African women who barely converse with their daughters but taught them what it means to be an African woman in a society that devalues our experiences to the best of their ability in all industry and honesty.

The first time I ever read a book by a West African writer was in my third year in junior secondary school where I came across Chinua Achebe’s; *Things Fall Apart*; Ola Rotimi’s, *The Gods are not to Blame* and Wole Soyinka’s, *The Lion and the Jewel*. These authors had diverse opinions on Nigeria’s problematic society. Even though I had read these books, I did not critically analyze my role as an advocate for my community and the world around me. It was only a few years ago, when I unearthed Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a memoir loaded with so many ruminations on racism, self-acceptance, Black womanhood and belonging that I realized that I was not unaccompanied. I had finally found myself in books I consumed. Girls like me did exist in the stories I wanted to read. These stories featured women of colour and girls with brown skin and textured hair, women who have been exploited, but vowed that their daughters would not experience their pain. I was home.

As Acquaye (2016) aptly phrased it:

People of marginalized identities learn from a very young age how to insert themselves into stories about white, able, heteronormative characters as if these narratives are shoes

that can fit any foot. We adapt to the lens of a white gaze, even when our experiences do not align with what we read. There is, no doubt, a universality to much literature, allowing us to see ourselves within different narratives. However, other times, these narratives make us feel left out. A little voice told me that I did not always have to fit my identity to the perspectives of these characters. And when I began reading books by diverse writers, this voice grew louder and louder. It said that there were more stories to voice and several ways to tell them. (para. 8)

I desired more knowledge I needed to see and hear myself in literature. So, I embarked on an expedition. I read books by African women and writers of colour. I surged through bell hooks' *Bone Black*, a memoir that shows the unfolding of a woman's creativity and one strong spirited child's journey to be a writer; Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood* cogitates the quandaries associated with embracing new ideas and practices against the tendency to cling to tradition. In this novel, Emecheta reveals and celebrates the joy derived from fulfilling responsibilities related to family matters in childbearing, mothering, and nurturing activities among West African women. Emecheta also draws attention to how the 'joys of motherhood' also include apprehension, commitment, and agony.

Then I read Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. A deeply personal story but also a portrait of a revolving time in America's future, this autobiography lets us see history in the making through the eyes of an African-American woman involved in the civil rights movement (<https://www.txstate.edu/bobcatbook/pastsitearchives/2014-2015/book/book.html>). I fell in love with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It humanizes survivors of war; it shows a side of war that is often overlooked all in the name of patriotism and creates a pivotal moment

in Nigeria's history. It shows the Igbo's impassioned tussle to create a sovereign government in Nigeria, and the terrifying carnage that ensued.

Finally, I witnessed the turbulence and tenderness that characterized Black motherhood as I read *Double Stitch*, a brilliant and stirring collection of prose, poetry and scholarship by forty-seven Black women writers that explored the depth of the bond between Black mother-daughter relationships and demonstrated how this relationship has moulded Black women and families. A revealing work, its spirit of self-celebration tempered by often painful candour, the book is free of matriarchal and feminist ideology. While focusing on mothers' and daughters' bond, the collection also describes Black women as sisters, friends, victims, workers and lovers (<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/double-stitch-patricia-bell-scott/>).

I have never read a collection of stories that so captured my conflicting thoughts and emotions as an African woman. What I loved most about these stories was the way every chapter was a captivating, intimate encounter that explored the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood, its effect on Black mother-daughter relationship, enduring themes that characterize the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood and how the competing perspectives have created a distinct Afrocentric ideology of motherhood (Bell-Scott et al., 1991). Within these pages, I found a place for my spirit to dwell; I saw my identity reflected and was proud to be an African woman. These Black women who came from different social class and backgrounds had in some way received the same teachings about the significance of African womanhood, motherhood and had created a way for me to celebrate African women in all their different textures and design.

Reading these books, and many others create an intimate, extensive conversation with African women on the crisp pages of these books. Through them, African women can turn their stories into meaningful, monumental works of art. It makes us more confident in our skin, more

justified and empowered as an African female writer (Acquaye, 2016). The dread of putting my thoughts to paper was dead. I was not afraid anymore. My stories need to be heard. My voice is just as important as the woman next to me. I was free. Acquaye (2016) asserts that “They are little Black girls now finding this sooner than we did. Maybe there is a little black girl lost in a book right now, recognizing herself and all her potential. There are certainly many stories by African women left to explore, now that there is a secret sisterhood of words, a therapeutic circle that meets within the crisp pages of a book. Having begun this journey, that endless corridor of mirrors is where our stories will continue to go” (para. 18).

Mothers, Daughters and Othermothers is all about centralizing the voices of West African women whose knowledge has continuously been ignored by mainstream educational discourses. My study focuses on mother-daughter relationships which is one of the most fundamental relationships among West African women. These women have empowered their daughters by passing on the shared knowledge essential to their survival as women (Collins 2002). As a West African woman, I can identify the profound influence that my mother, grandmother and othermothers have had on my life. West African communities have recognized that vesting one person with the full responsibility of mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, “othermothers”¹ women, who assist blood mothers² by sharing mothering duties, traditionally have been central to the institution of African motherhood (Troester, 1984).

Relationships between African mothers and daughters are profoundly affected by the subtleties as well as the brutality of sexism within and without African communities. Among the rules of patriarchy are that all women are to be mothers, a rule applied to African women no less

¹ Women who care for children not biologically their own.

² It means your biological mother

than to White women. This idea persists even though not all mothers are biological mothers and many women do not wish to be. What is of particular interest in respect to African women is that racism, sexism and poverty frequently bring about situations in which many African children will have surrogate mothers. These are the women who care for our young and fill in for mothers who cannot be there. This bond shows that many African girls have multiple models of “a mother” (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

Johnnetta B. Cole in *Double Stitch* describes this relationship perfectly in her essay:

I am of course a daughter, as every girl child and woman are, regardless of where she was born, the colour of her skin, the sound of her speech, or the number of her possessions.

The woman who bore me is no longer alive, but I seem to be her daughter in increasingly profound ways. I have no daughters. That is to say; I have not borne any female children.

And yet, I am a surrogate mother to many daughters, 1700 of whom are students at Spellman College. (Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. xii).

Surrogate mothers not only serve to relieve some of the stress that can develop between children and parents but also provide multiple role models for children (Wane, 2000). Inspired by the works of my surrogate mother's like Maya Angelou, Buchi Emecheta, Patricia Bell-Scott, Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nathani Njoki Wane, Adwoa Ntozake Onoura, Renita Weems, Anne Moody and Mary Weems who reminded me that I was not alone. Their work provided me with an alternate view of motherhood that extended beyond the male and female binary, and the Western nuclear family model, (as cited in Onoura, 2015) as well as connecting motherwork to identity formation (Mackey, 2000). Their writings illustrate a long-standing African centred tradition of “mothering” whose ideas paved the way for more complex readings of motherhood that challenged earlier feminist paradigms wherein motherhood

is seen as an automatically patriarchal and oppressive space (Onoura, 2015). I include their words in my work as words of othermothers.

James (1997) affirms that “othermothers, community othermothers, and African women keep the traditional African value systems of communal³ sharing and ownership alive. He argues that the entire community benefits from African women’s motherwork and suggests that it serves as an important Black feminist link to the development of new models for social change” (p. 45). In short, whether we are mothers, othermothers or community othermothers, traditional African notions of community are useful strategies that sustain the survival of African peoples all over the world (Wane, 2000).

As a West African woman, I am gravely concerned about how patriarchal and colonial discourses have constructed West African female headed households. While the dominant society denigrates African single motherhood and often dismisses these women as “welfare queens,” female headed households have been the core of survival for West African peoples in Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe. When African men are absent from home due to migratory labour, family abandonment or other reasons, African women are left with the difficult and challenging task of caring for themselves, their children, and other community members (Wane, 2000). “Mothering within West African communities can be understood as a form of cultural work or as one-way communities organized to nurture both themselves and future generations” (James, 1997, p. 44).

Among West African women, mothering is a cultural phenomenon. “Women without children prepare meals as if they are expecting some children for both the midday and evening

³ A community in which everyone lives and works together, property and childcare is shared rather than being owned by an individual

meals. If no child drops by, the women pack the food and take it to a home where there are children.” The actions of such women stand as evidence of the extent to which “mothering is not limited to females with biological offspring, but is a community practice” (James, 1997, p. 44). West African women in traditionally polygamous relationships, who are compatible with each other, often share the care of all the children in the household so they can more quickly and efficiently carry out their daily responsibilities (James, 1997).

Thus, women in an African context do not foster children merely because they are orphaned. Othermothering is a way of extending children’s primary relationships to a more significant number of people within the extended family and the community at large. It is also a way to relieve mothers from some of the responsibilities associated with nurturing young children. Similarly, community othermothering, a role usually reserved for “elders,” recognizes the value of communal mothering practices (Wane, 2000).

Mother-daughter relationships must be worked on if each person in the community is to grow in positive ways. The turbulence beheld in the lives of African women who have not been able to come to grips with this formidable relationship. This collection of stories will examine the turbulence and tenderness that embodies African mother-daughter relationships at various points in my life. And in a challenging way, it leaves unexplored territories. What is it about this relationship that sets it apart from all others? I write with great anticipation to show insights into this relationship that is seldom written about (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

CHAPTER II

Statement of Purpose

Alone

It's 5:30 pm. I'm sitting on the dark muddy stairs waiting for him to come home. That man who is always in my dreams. There's a giant boulder on my shoulders. It's making it harder for me to breathe. Loneliness strokes the lump lodged at the back of my throat. I am trying to get it out, but it just won't budge. I am shifting to a place where nothingness grows, moving at a pace where now you see me, now you don't. I am trying to walk in the dark, but all I feel is the fear of the fall. If it doesn't go well, then I won't. But what if I fall? How long will I sit on the dark muddy stairs waiting for him to come home? I feel lost a daddyless daughter all alone with broken words of all I thought you were, but you're not.

I am sorry Mama. You should have been enough, but you're not. I love you Mama, but I love him more. Mama said. "My heart would never break," that's what it did, it broke. It's crazy when I stare into an empty space and see your smile as bright as day. I have not been the same since you left. I am still sitting on those dark muddy stairs waiting for you to come home, but I know you're not coming back. I have hope, hope that you'll show up and take us home.

This summer isn't the same without him. We should be at the beach walking through that small beautiful playground behind the old house. Where are you now? Do I have to wither away yearning for you? Can I exist without you? There is a dark chasm in my soul, that is starting to show through my cold pulsing heart, behind brown eyes half closed. I want to let him go, but I can't. Am trying to forget the smile on his face but am afraid I never will. I thought I would be fine by now, but loneliness doesn't die. It grows like a weed feeding off everything around me. This is not the way the end was supposed to be. Where do I belong for the rest of my life? Not here, not now. If this is what loneliness feels like, I don't want to be here.

Mothers, Daughters, and Othermothers is a collection of short stories, poems and personal narratives that mirror my real-life experience with Black motherhood, daughterhood and the silencing that takes place when our stories are written by those who do not share our diverse cultural backgrounds. Our stories have always been depicted from the Eurocentric perspective which has shown African women as one thing over and over again and unfortunately that is what we have become stories of negatives, of difference, of darkness, stories of African people incessantly labelled as devils. The aftermath of these abtruse stories is that it robs us of our dignity. It makes our recognition of equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar (Adichie, 2009).

This dominant story (though emanating from European imaginations about the backwardness, savagery and darkness that is African peoples) has had lasting material effects. Moreover, this authoritative, imagined story continues to overshadow our experiences of resisting and navigating negative stereotypes (Onoura, 2015). Therefore, as Morrison suggests, the act of storying, of imagination is inextricably connected to our emotional memories and by extension our lived realities. It is linked to our experiences living in a space where we are silenced, where primacy is given to empiricism, objectivism and positivism, and where the stories of African mothers (biological or social), our multiple subjectivities and ways of knowing are subjugated in a patriarchal and sometimes racist educational system (Matsuda, 1996, Razack, 1993). Stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories have broken the dignity of our people, but stories can also repair our dignity. When we realize that there is never a single story, then we will regain our dignity as a people (Adichie, 2009).

Mothers, Daughters and Othermothers explores my struggle to create self, to embrace my identity, to embrace the otherness and critically analyze my encounter with the collective experience of being a West African woman in a society that fails to recognize my experience. The journey to that desolate place has been an interesting one for me. It has given me an insight into self that I believe is worth sharing. The road to accepting the amazingly strong relationship between African mothers and their daughters has been a difficult one for me. It has evolved, sometimes stronger, sometimes broken, sometimes not being able to break the narrative of turbulence that has plagued this relationship.

In “Passing the Torch: A Mother and Daughter Reflect on their Experience Across Generations,” Bernard and Bernard (1998) examine how “African mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social and political awareness” (p. 47). They eloquently state that African mothers are expected to pass on the torch to “their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations” (p. 47). Othermothers look after children to whom they have no blood relations or legal obligation. There is usually an agreement between mothers, aunts, uncles or fathers who play the role of othermothers in a given community. A woman elder who mothers both adult and children assumes community mothering on the other hand. She understands leadership roles and becomes a consultant for her community (Wane, 2008).

Othermothering can be described as the practice of raising children who are not one’s own. Borne out of kinship practices in Africa, othermothering is highly valued in African and African American communities, the Caribbean and the African diaspora. The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” captures its spirit (Jack-Davies, 2018). These women who I call “othermothers,” are grandmothers, aunts, or cousins, united by kinship with my blood

mother (Joseph, 1981). In West African societies, these women-centred networks of community-based childcare often extend beyond the boundaries of biologically related extended families to supportive “fictive kin” (Troester, 1984, p. 5).

Othermothers are significant not only in supporting children but also in helping blood mothers who, for whatever reason, are ill-prepared or have little desire to take care of their children. Given the pressure from the broader political economy, the emphasis placed on community-based child care and the respect given to othermothers who assume the duties of childcare has served a critical function in West African communities (Troester, 1984). One concept that has been constant throughout the history of West African societies is the centrality of motherhood in religions, philosophies and social institutions. As Barbara Christian points out, “There is no doubt that motherhood is for most African people a symbol of creativity and continuity” (as cited in Bell-Scott, Guy-Sheftall, Royster, Sims-Woods, Dacosta-Willis & Fultz 1991, p. 45).

Research on motherhood in African societies supports Christian’s claim. Despite variations among cultures, a strong case has been made that West African women occupy a dominant role in African family networks. First, they provide much of their own and their children’s economic support and are structurally central to their families. Second, the image of motherhood is culturally elaborated and valued across diverse West African philosophies, and motherhood is also evaluated. Finally, while biological mother-child bond is valued, child care is a collective responsibility (Bell-Scot et al., 1991). Mothers and mother figures emerge as central characters in autobiographies such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969); bell hooks’ *Bone Black* (1996); Bell-Scott’s *Double Stitch* (1991); and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992).

Alice Walker, an American novelist and poet, attributes the trust she has in herself to her mother. In describing this relationship, Mary Helen Washington points out that Walker “never doubted her powers of judgment because her mother assumed that they were sound; she never questioned her right to follow her intellectual bent, because her mother implicitly entitled her to it.” By giving her daughter a library card, Walker’s mom showed she knew the value of a free mind (as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 102).

In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious-minded dialogue and humour, African women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist (Collins, 2002). Black women’s fiction, such as Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “The Johnson Girls” (1981); Toni Morrison’s novels *Sula* (1974); *The Bluest Eye* (1970), as well as Terry McMillan’s blockbuster novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), is one prominent location where Black women’s relationships are taken seriously (Collins, 2002).

African female writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women’s relationships with one another (Collins, 2002). Mary Helen Washington points out that one distinguishing feature of African women’s literature is that it is about African women. Women talk to one another, and “their relationships with othermothers, mothers, grandmothers, and daughters are vital to their growth and well-being” (Collins, 2002, p. 104). The significance placed on relationships among African-American women transcends U.S. Black women’s writings. For example, Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Changes* (1991) uses the friendship between two African women to explore the challenges facing professional women in contemporary African societies (Collins, 2002). Adwoa Ntozake Onuora’s book, *Anansesem: On African Maternal Pedagogies*, (2015) explores the experiences of teaching and learning while

mothering, and Buchi Emecheta's novel, *Joy of Motherhood* (1979) explores the need for a woman to be fertile and above all to give birth to sons.

As a West African woman, who has grown up in a society of social injustice and an ongoing struggle for freedom from oppression, my mother, grandmother and othermothers have had an extraordinary influence on my journey to discover self and embrace my West African heritage. As a daughter of these phenomenal women, I have struggled to define my own identity by making our relationships culturally and politically significant to our struggles as West African women. Most of what I have learned from my African experience has been through storytelling. Storytelling has always been an integral part of my culture. It is a way of educating the children in the struggles, culture, identity, and oppression of their people. To date, storytelling continues to be a platform for resisting neo-colonialism and various forms of abuse. It is also a tool for the celebration and reclamation of our African heritage (Onuora, 2015).

This study provides me with an opportunity to share the story of my struggle with my identity, culture and a mutual understanding of our histories. According to Wilson (1998) "stories are an essential core of our being. The stories told are cultural, traditional, educational, political and spiritual." My stories contain essential teachings that pass down historical facts, traditions and life lessons (as cited in Smith, 2001, p. 146). These stories will mirror the formation of the mother-daughter bond. The strength and character of the relationship depend in part upon the richness and stability of the tools used in its making just as the sharpness in the mother's psyche or the condition of a daughter's birth can impair or enable mother-daughter bonds. As a composite, in the next section, I will be detailing the Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspectives on motherhood and the uniqueness of motherhood in African communities; in it, I will illuminate the complexity of contemporary mother-daughter relations (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

CHAPTER III

The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Mother-Daughter Relationships

“What did your mother teach you about life?” a question Patricia Hill Collins often asked her students in her courses on African women. “Go to school first and get a good education. Do not get too serious too young,” “Make sure you look around and that you can take care of yourself before you settle down,” and “do not trust them, want more for yourself than just a man,” are typical responses from Black women. Her students share stories of how their mothers have encouraged them to cultivate satisfying relationships with Black men while anticipating disappointments, to desire marriage while planning viable alternatives, to become mothers only when fully prepared to do so, but, above all, they stress their mother’s insistence on being self-reliant and resourceful (Collins, 1987).

These daughters of various ages and from diverse social class backgrounds, family structure and geographic regions, had somehow received strikingly similar messages about African womanhood that I had received from my mother and grandmother. Even though our mothers employed diverse teaching strategies, these African daughters have all been exposed to common themes about the meaning of womanhood in African culture (Mullings, 1986).

Though daughters forge their identities separate from their mothers, they frequently acknowledge that a part of themselves is indeed their mother’s child. Within African communities, this bond frequently transcends the personal relationship between a mother and her daughter. Nurturing females of community grandmothers and aunts often encircle their daughters to ensure some familiarity in their journey into a world characterized by uncertainty and even hostility. This section contains testimonies about the gift of our mothers, grandmothers and othermothers in all their various textures and designs (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

The Power of Names

Abimbola born into wealth

The proverbial magnificent doer

Ewere crowned in fortune

The warrior as steady as the sunrise

Born to the land that breeds the palm tree

She is the offspring of Olaseni

She is Onyebuchi, daughter

She is swept across a perfidious landscape

Destined for greatness

You see, but you have not seen

You hear, but you have not heard

She must wolf the work of her ten fingers

She must saunter the land of her ancestors

She must come to respect the world

Hail happiness has come home

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical background of my work explores the relationship between the meaning of motherhood in African culture and African mother-daughter relationships addressing three primary questions. First, how have competing perspectives about motherhood intersected to produce a distinctly Afrocentric ideology of motherhood? Second, what are the enduring themes that characterize this Afrocentric ideology of motherhood? Finally, what effect might this Afrocentric ideology of motherhood have on black mother-daughter relationship? (Collins, 1987).

Competing Perspectives on Motherhood

Eurocentricity

The question of Eurocentricity has been with us for a while now, yet it remains complex and challenging. It has been widely probed in various disciplines, particularly with regards to history and culture. The concept of Eurocentricity arose in the post-colonial and post-orientalist discourses that were concerned with Western hegemony. It has enthused both Western and non-Western intellectuals, who have relentlessly questioned Western authority and supremacy as revealed in conversations, canons and established paradigms (Akkach, 2003). As it moves across disciplines, however, the Eurocentricity question carries with it a problematic package that has been unpacked and critiqued.

Eurocentricity has been criticized for setting up a divisive polarity of self and other, European and non-European, which has been used interchangeably with Western and non-Western. This polarity assumes that there are other, non-European domains where reality presents different possibilities of thinking, making and engagement; that the agents of these domains are fundamentally different; and that their non-reducible and non-erasable otherness can

be unveiled, captured and engaged using current Eurocentric conceptual tools (Gran, 1996). It also has been criticized in fighting the other in a desperate search for, and reconstruction of, their assumed difference (Bowman, 1997).

Eurocentricity condones ethnocentric valorization at the expense of sometimes degrading other group's perspectives. Every culture has its religion, language, customs and behaviours. Ethnocentrism is based on prejudice and preconceived ideas about people and cultures different from one's own, which can lead to misperceptions, misjudgments and discrimination. Moreover, Eurocentricity presents the particular historical reality of Europeans as the total of the human experience (Asante, 1987). It imposes Eurocentric realities as "universal"; i.e., that which is White is presented as applying to the human condition in general, while that which is non-White is viewed as group-specific and therefore not "human." This explains why some scholars and artists of African descent rush to deny their Blackness; they believe that to exist as a Black person is not to live as a universal human being (Asante, 1991). From an Afrocentric standpoint, one's primary identity is one's self-identity, which is ultimately one's cultural identity; without a strong cultural identity, one is lost to the dominating Eurocentric culture (Asante, 1991).

The Dominant Perspective: Eurocentric Views on White Motherhood

The cult of true womanhood, with its emphasis on motherhood as woman's highest calling, has long held a special place in gender symbolism of White Eurocentric views. From this perspective, women's activities should limit them to the care of children, the nurturing of a husband, and the maintenance of a household. By managing this separate domestic sphere, women gain social influence through their roles as mothers, transmitters of culture, and parents for the next generation (Carby, 1987; Dill, 1986; Mullings, 1986).

While a substantial number of White women have benefitted from protections of White patriarchy provided by the dominant ideology, White women themselves have recently challenged its tenets. On one pole lies a cluster of women, the traditionalists, who aim to retain the centrality of motherhood in women's lives. For traditionalists, differentiating between the experience of motherhood, which for them has been quite satisfying and motherhood as an institution central in reproducing gender inequality, has proved difficult. The other pole is occupied by women who advocate dismantling motherhood as an institution. They suggest that compulsory motherhood is outlawed and that the experience of motherhood can only be satisfying if women can also choose not to be mothers. Arrayed between these dichotomous positions are women who argue for an expanded, but not a necessarily different role for women, women can be mothers as long as they are not just mothers (Allen, 1983; Fraiberg, 1977).

Three themes implicit in White perspectives of motherhood are particularly problematic to Black women and others outside of the debate. First, the assumption that mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for child rearing is less applicable to Black families. While the idea of the cult of true womanhood has been held up to Black women for emulation, racial oppression has denied Black family's enough resources to support private, nuclear family households. Second, strict sex roles segregation, with separate male and female spheres of influence within the family, has been more commonly found in African families than in White middle-class ones.

Finally, the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a "good" mother one must stay at home, making motherhood a full-time "occupation," is similarly uncharacteristic of African families (Carby, 1987; Mullings, 1986). Even though selected groups of White women are challenging the cult of true womanhood and

its accompanying definitions of motherhood, the dominant ideology remains powerful if the dominant approach remains prominent in scholarly and popular discourse. Eurocentric views of White motherhood will continue to affect Black women's lives (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

Eurocentric Views on Black Motherhood

Eurocentric perspectives on African motherhood revolve around two interdependent images that together define African women's roles in White and African families. The first image is that of the Mammy, the faithful, devoted worker. Like one of the family, Mammy diligently "mothers" her white children, caring for them and loving them as if they were her own. Mammy is the ideal African mother for she recognizes her place. She is paid next to nothing and yet cheerfully accepts her inferior status. However, when she enters her own home, this same Mammy is transformed into the second image, the too strong matriarch who raises weak sons and "unnaturally superior" daughters (Moynihan, 1965; Zinn, 1987). When she protests, she is labelled aggressive and non-feminine, yet when African women remain silent, she is rendered invisible (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

Cheryl Gilkes (1934a) contends that "African women's assertiveness and their use of every expression of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. As punishment, Black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images" (as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 69). Portraying African women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas help justify African women's oppression (Collins, 2002).

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning in society. Because the authority to define societal values is an essential instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black

womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones. The objective of these stereotypes is not to reflect or represent reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of external social relations (Carby 1987). These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, rational, and inevitable parts of everyday life. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black women's lives (Collins, 2002).

The task of debunking Mammy by analyzing Black women's roles as exploited workers and challenging the matriarchy thesis by demonstrating that Black women do not wield unequal power in Black families has long preoccupied African scholars (Billingsley, 1968; Burnham, 1985; Hill, 1972; Rollins, 1985). However, an equally telling critique concerns uncovering the functions of these images and their role in explaining Black women's subordination in systems of race, class and gender oppression.

As Mae King points out, White definitions of Black motherhood foster the dominant group's exploitation of Black women by blaming Black women for their reactions to their subordination (King, 1972). For example, while the stay at home mother has been held up to all women as the ideal, African women have been compelled to work outside the home, typically in a very narrow range of occupations (Collins, 1987).

Even though Black women were forced to become domestic workers and be influential figures in Black households, labelling them Mammies and matriarchs denigrates Black women. Without a countervailing Afrocentric ideology of motherhood, White perspectives on both White and African motherhood places Black women in a no-win situation. Adhering to these standards brings the danger of the lowered self-esteem of internalized oppression, one that, if passed on from mother to daughter, provides a powerful mechanism for controlling African communities (Collins, 1987).

The Road Home

It was the year 1992. I was five years old at the time my parents had put an end to their calamitous marriage. I was living with my father and my new stepmother, and my mother had moved back to her hometown. I am sitting in the car waiting for the driver to get my prescription from the doctor. As I look out the window, the shadows are now twice as long as themselves; the air is damp and cold, smelling faintly of a car's exhaust fumes. The sun sinks lower in the sky until the trees look like Black statues silhouetted against the evening sky; the shadows are melting slowly into the Blackness of night. Suddenly the sound of a car driving up the driveway with bright headlights comes bouncing over the street blinding me momentarily before disappearing into the murkiness of night. I sit up again looking out the window of the car, staring at the cars parked at a distance. I notice someone walking toward me from the other end of the parking lot. She has long Black hair braided into a cornrow; she's wearing a blue t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

As the lady with the beautiful hair gets closer, I realize it is my mother; she is staring through the window of every car she passes by as if she is searching for something of great value. She seems almost frantic. As she approaches from a distance, I scream "Mama" "Mama." The noisy engines shroud my tiny voice from cars moving in and out of the parking lot. I cry out several times for her to look my way, but she still does not see me. I am scared at that point that she might not see me. What if she passes by the car and I never see her

again? The fear I feel at that moment is like overwhelming darkness enveloping me. I am determined to try one last time. I scream so loud; it feels like my life depends on the outcome of that one act. “Mama” “Mama.” She turns around and looks in my direction and starts running toward me.

Luckily enough the door to the passenger seat is open. She unlocks the door of the car and says, “Ewere” we are leaving. My mum only calls me that when she’s angry. I try to explain to her why I am sitting all alone in the car, but she ignores me. She isn't listening to what I have to say. She picks me up from the car and, as we are moving, my shoe falls off. I cry out, “Mama, my shoe.” “She says, “Don’t worry, I will get you more shoes when we get home.” As we run down the parking lot, her soles are digging into the hard concrete ground.

The evening shadow is closing in; only the light from the lamp posts light her pathway. Her breath comes in short, sharp spurts matching her steps. The path she knows gets steeper as her feet dig into the shifting ground. As we move closer to the dimly lit street, my mum has a car waiting for us on the road. It’s a gleaming Black Peugeot, large and bulky, yet aerodynamically curved. It seems like some rapacious animal resenting its confinement to the street. As we get into the car, my mum says to the driver, “Move like your life depends on it.”

We leave the broad highway lined with shops spilling out their gleaming merchandise and turn onto a narrow street until we are creeping along a nearly deserted back road. On

either side is an empty building with boarded-up windows and weeds growing through the dark stairs. As we move down the dusty street, I turn around and notice a green military wagon coming up behind us. We know we cannot stop because the car is coming up behind us at an alarming speed. I can see the fear in my mother's eyes as we drive along the dark road. The car needs to go faster for they are behind us. She knows it will not be long until they catch up with us as we hear the noise of engines behind. Looking 300 yards to her left, she sees the car behind us gaining speed.

Through the trees is an old road which no one uses anymore. The driver dives into the driveway as the beam of light shines right on us. The car with the uniformed driver drives past our hiding place at high speed, kicking up sand and dust in his wake. "Keep going," "Keep going," my mother tells the driver. We drive deeper along the old road and stop to make sure no one is following us. We wait for four hours which feels like an eternity. I can see the relief on my mother's face when no one comes after us. We drive out of the south side of the road, opposite an old shoe factory, and continue our journey to my mother's hometown. We stop on the way to eat and, I suppose, try to rest after a harrowing day. It is a comfort to know I am going home with Mama. At the end of that deserted road, the sun has set for us. For this is a journey, we must take, and we must go alone.

CHAPTER IV

Afrocentricity

There is a long history of Western dominance of what constitutes valid knowledge and how such knowledge should be produced and disseminated internally and internationally (Amin 1989; Said 1979). Fortunately, such dominance is challenged in the feminist and postmodernist call for the introduction, validation, and interrogation of “other” voices and ways of knowing to provide more complete accounts of the history of ideas and events that have shaped human growth and development (as cited in Dei, 1994). Dei (1994) advances a notion of Afrocentricity that asserts that both “African indigenous cultural values, traditions, mythology, and history may be understood as a body of knowledge dealing with the social world, and that Afrocentricity is an alternative, non-exclusionary, and non-hegemonic system of knowledge informed by African peoples’ histories and experiences” (p. 6-5).

Molefi Asante’s statements about Afrocentricity leave no doubt about the goal of Afrocentricity, that is, the recovery of African freedom and creativity. In *Afrocentricity* (1988), for example, he told us that Afrocentricity is ultimately “the measure of our lives.” It must inform our approach to everything, continued: walking, running, loving, eating, working, and so forth (as cited in Mazama, 2002, p. 218). In *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998), Asante also asserted that “The goal of Afrocentricity is our liberation, our freedom from tyranny.” He beautifully stated that “we are on a pilgrimage to regain our freedom” (as cited in Mazama, 2002, p. 218). Afrocentricity is about the investigation and understanding of phenomena from a perspective grounded in African-centered values. It is about the validation of African experiences and histories, as well as a critique of the continued exclusion and relegation of African knowledge systems from educational texts, mainstream academic knowledge, and scholarship (Dei, 1994).

Afrocentricity can be a theory of social change that calls for self-transformation among its primary target audiences, African people on the African continent, and the diaspora (Hunter, 1993). It enjoins Africans to have a strong sense of identity, history, and culture to deal with some of the problems of their existence today and in the future. It also embodies a struggle for the total liberation of the African mind from the effects of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism (Dei, 1994). However, Asante has pointed out that an essential theoretical aspect of Afrocentricity consists of interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the fringes of the European experience. In this sense, then, Afrocentricity is not a reactionary response to Western cultural domination. To reclaim African cultural values inadvertently would mean creating a context to buffer against the historically dominating Western culture (as cited in Dei, 1994, p. 5).

From a researcher's point of view, Asante argues that "Afrocentricity can have a significant impact upon the way African researchers view their identity, specifically considering the African people as centered, located, oriented, and grounded. Afrocentricity is, therefore, a philosophical and theoretical perspective that when applied to research can form the essential core of the idea. In terms of research outcomes, the issue of cultural location takes precedence over the topic or the data under consideration" (as cited in Mkabella, 2005, p.179). The argument is that Africans have moved off social, political, philosophical, and economic terms for half a millennium. Consequently, it becomes necessary to examine all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects and human agents rather than as objects in a European frame of reference. Of course, this means that Afrocentricity has implications for Indigenous African culture. Here, the motifs of locations and constituents of centeredness or de-centeredness become essential when using the Afrocentric approach (Mkabella, 2005).

The Afrocentric discourse contains some uncomfortable truths for some Western scholars. With Afrocentricity as a valid form of knowledge is challenging existing Western dominant discourses, Western scholars sense losing their traditional power to define, dominate, control, and exclude. Afrocentricity, however, is about opening a new and transformed consciousness for all peoples, particularly those of African descent (Dei, 1994). It is about Africans taking up their right to the experiences of the continent, the enjoyment of their culture, the celebration of their history, and the continued survival and togetherness of African peoples, irrespective of where they have decided to reside. Afrocentricity is about inclusion, particularly, in an era in which the marginalization of African women's experiences and the subjugation of their identities have become more problematic than ever before (Henry, 1991).

African Perspectives on Motherhood

One concept that has been constant throughout the history of African societies is the centrality of motherhood in religions, philosophies and social institutions. As Barbara Christian points out, "There is no doubt that motherhood is for most African people symbolic of creativity and continuity" (Christian, 1985). Cross-cultural research on motherhood in African societies appears to support Christian's claim (Oppong, 1983). West African sociologist Christine Oppong suggests that African women must cast off the Western notion of equating household with family because it obscures women's family roles in African cultures (Oppong, 1982). While the classic White, middle-class nuclear family conceptualizes family life as being divided into two oppositional spheres the "male" sphere of economic providing and the "female" sphere of effective nurturing this type of rigid sex role segregation is not part of the West African tradition. Mothering is not a privatized nurturing "occupation" reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children is not the exclusive responsibility of men. Instead, for African

women, emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival is interwoven as interdependent, complementary dimensions of motherhood (Collins, 1978).

Despite variations among societies, a strong case has been made that West African women occupy influential roles in African family networks (Thiam, 1978). First, since they are not dependent on males for economic support and provide for critical dimensions of their own and their children's economic support, women are structurally central to families (Bell-Scott et al., 1991). Second, the image of the mother is one that is culturally elaborated and valued across diverse West African societies. Continuing the lineage is essential in West African philosophies, and motherhood is similarly valued (Mbiti, 1969). Finally, while the biological mother/child bond is valued, child care was a collective responsibility, a situation fostering cooperative, age stratified, woman-centred "mothering" networks (Collins, 1987).

Research by Africanists suggests that much more of this African heritage of organized, resilient, woman-centred mothering networks of blood mothers and othermothers was retained among Africans in the diaspora than had previously been thought. The retention of West African culture as a culture of resistance offered enslaved Africans and exploited African alternative ideologies to those advanced by dominant groups. Central to these reinterpretations of African institutions and culture is a reconceptualization of Black family life and the role of women in Black family networks (Sudarkasa, 1981; White, 1985). West African perspectives may have been combined with the changing political and economic situations framing African communities to produce specific enduring themes characterizing an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

Enduring Themes of an Afrocentric Ideology of Motherhood

An Afrocentric ideology of motherhood must reconcile the competing worldviews of three conflicting perspectives of motherhood. An ongoing tension exists between efforts to mould the institution of African motherhood for the benefit of the dominant group and efforts by African women to define and value their own experiences with motherhood. This tension leads to a continuum of responses. For those women who either aspire to the cult of true womanhood without having the resources to support such a lifestyle or who believe stereotypical analyses of themselves as dominating matriarchs, motherhood can be an oppressive institution. However, the experience of motherhood can provide African women with a base of self-actualization, status in the African community, and a reason for social activism (as cited in Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

These contradictions can exist side by side within African communities, families, and even within individual women (Collins, 1987). Embedded in these changing relationships are four enduring themes that characterize the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood. First, blood mothers, othermothers and woman-centered networks in African families is very significant; second, African women incorporate their activities as economic providers as part of mothering; third, motherhood provides a basis for community othermothers to participate in social activism; and, fourth, African women can attest to the fact that motherhood is a symbol of power in their family and community. As the issues facing our mothers were entirely different from those currently facing African women in the diaspora for any given historical moment, the actual institutional forms that these themes take depend on the severity of oppression and African women's resources for resistance (Collins, 1987).

Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks

In African communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children, but African communities have also identified that entrusting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Troester, 1984).

The centrality of women in extended African families is well known (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974). Organized, resilient, woman-centred networks of bloodmothers and othermothers are crucial to understanding this centrality. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins acted as othermothers by taking on childcare responsibilities for each other's children. When needed, temporary child care arrangements turned into long-term care or open adoption (Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974; Young, 1970). In African communities, these women-centered networks of community-based childcare often extend beyond the boundaries of biologically related extended families to support "fictive kin" (Stack, 1974).

Even when relationships were not between kin or fictive kin, African community norms were such that neighbours cared for each other's children. Njoki Nathani Wane describes the importance of community-based childcare that othermothers in the family residence she lived in, in Toronto, offered her daughter (Wane, 2000). In doing so, she also shows how African cultural values based on collective childcare has found institutional support in adverse conditions under which so many African women were mothered (as cited in Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

When I first came to Canada, my niece, who was still breastfeeding her daughter, did not hesitate to mother my daughter during my absence. Thus, it was quite natural for me to talk to other women who had children of my daughter's age and arrange for community mothering. We had very little in common except for the fact that we were all graduate students. We came from different cultural backgrounds and different parts of the world. Three mothers were from Africa, one from Europe and one from Lebanon. However, we trusted each other, even though we barely knew one another. (Wane, 2000, p. 107)

Othermothers have vital roles not only in supporting children but also in supporting bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, are ill-prepared or are not able to care for their children due to work. Given the pressures from the broader political economy, the emphasis placed on community-based childcare and the respect given to othermothers who assume the responsibility of childcare has served a critical function in African communities. Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty, or children, who for other reasons have been rejected by their mothers, have all been supported by othermothers (Collins, 1987).

Mullings (1997) asserts that "many households participate in fluid, family-like networks that have different purposes. Women activate some networks for socialization, reproduction, and consumption, and others for emotional support, economic cooperation, and sexuality. The networks may overlap, but they are not coterminous" (p. 74). The resiliency of women-centred family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for African children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of the family have been continually reworked to help African living in the diaspora as a collectivity cope with and resist oppression (Collins, 2002). We see in one of my stories how othermothering functioned within my family network.

Dear Frances

October 16th, 2016

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Dear Frances,

Here I am, wide awake, that pesky old Mr. Trouble won't let go.

The goons of despair and loneliness have barged into my life again.

I want to be free of them forever; I don't know what to do.

I'm spiralling out of control in panic.

Like I always do, when I don't know what to do with myself.

So, what I do for tonight is reach for my phone and call you.

The phone beeps, and there I hear a familiar voice.

Hello. Hello. Auntie good evening "I need your help."

I wait for a little while a response comes.

Are you okay? "You sound a bit off."

As we speak on the phone, it feels like home.

A place that has grounded my life.

Where I go to take the day off.

A place of abundant peace.

Where my worries are forgotten.

Sincerely,

Your Niece.

Providing as Part of Mothering

The work done by African women in providing the economic resources essential to Black family well-being affects motherhood differently. On the one hand, African women have long integrated their activities as economic providers into their mothering relationships. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood, where women's work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an essential and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood. On the other hand, African women's experiences as mothers under oppression were such that the type and purpose of work African women were forced to do significantly impacted the mothering relationship bloodmothers and othermothers had with their children (Collins, 1987).

While slavery both disrupted West African family patterns and exposed enslaved Africans to the gender ideologies and practices of slave-owners, it simultaneously made it impossible, had they wanted to do so, for enslaved Africans to implement slave-owner's ideologies. Thus, the separate spheres of providing as a male domain and affective nurturing as a female domain did not develop within African families (Dill, 1988; Mulling, 1986; White, 1999).

Providing for African children's physical survival and attending to their practical, emotional needs continued as interdependent dimensions of an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood; however, by changing the conditions under which African women worked and the purpose of the work itself, colonization and slavery introduced the problem of how best to continue traditional Afrocentric values under oppressive conditions. Institutions of community-based childcare, open adoption, and greater reliance on othermothers, all emerge as adaptations to the exigencies of combining exploitative work with nurturing children (Collins, 1987).

Despite the change in political status brought on by emancipation, most African women remained agricultural workers; however, their placement in African political economies allowed them to combine childcare with field labour. Njoki Nathani Wane describes how strong the links between providing and caring for others were for her mother:

When I was growing up in Kenya, my mother was always the first to rise and the last to go to bed. By the time the rest of the household was awake, she had been to the river and back; collected elephant grass from the river bed for the cows; fed and milked them; swept the floors; and prepared breakfast for the family. I normalized these acts of mother-work and gave little thought to what they meant to me, my mother, my siblings and the community at large. I now look back and realize that her sacrifices, hard work and commitment to change enabled me to be where I am today. It was her advice and refusal to treat girls differently than boys that instilled an intolerance of sexism in me. My mother's excellent mothering practices passed down to her by her mother, must be passed down to my children. (Wane, 2000, p. 105)

African women's shift from agriculture to a problematic and sometimes low paying job in inner cities and towns represented a change in the type of work done, but not in the meaning of work to women and their families. Whether they wanted to or not, most African women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a non-economically productive, female "occupation" (Collins, 1987). African women's collective efforts have given them voice and confidence, and enabled many African women to own property, send their children to school, and raise their families' standard of living (Wane, 2000).

Iya ni Wura

Iya ni wura

a iṣura to kiyesi i

ó tòn bí oòrùn

Ni awọn Dudu ju wakati ti aye wa

Iya ni wura

O kọ wa lati niṣe

O si sùre fun wa pẹlu re ọgbọn

O fi wa ni agbara ti idariji

Yeye ni wura

ó gbejade wa irora

ó rù wa lailewu nipasẹ egan iná

Ki a le rin ni ona ti o ti pese sile fun wa

Community Othermothers and Social Activism

African women's experiences as othermothers have provided a foundation for African women's social activism. African women's feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where African women feel accountable to all the children in their communities. This notion of African women as community othermothers for all African children traditionally allowed African women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families (cited in Bell-Scott et al., 1991). For example, sociologist Karen Fields describes how her grandmother, Mamie Garvin Fields, draws on her power as a community othermother when dealing with unfamiliar children:

She will say to a child on the street who looks up to no good, picking out a name at random, "Aren't you Miz Pickney's boy?" in that same reproving tone. If the reply is "No, ma'am my mother is Miz Gadsden," whatever threat there was dissipates. (Fields, 1983, p. xvii)

The use of family language in referring to members of the same family and community also illustrates this dimension of African motherhood. For example, Njoki Nathani Wane describes how a few weeks to her daughter's arrival in Toronto, she made efforts to talk to four other mothers in her apartment building.

We agreed to take turns picking up our girls from daycare and babysitting for each other. This schedule is organized every week, so each mother would pick up the children only twice or three times each semester. Also, our arrangement involved feeding, bathing and assisting the five children with their homework. As a result, the five of us, who were graduate students at the University of Toronto, were able to schedule our classes, study

routines and work without worrying about babysitting arrangements. The communal childcare arrangements I made upon my daughter's arrival in Canada were not new to me. I had come from a community where a child is not the sole responsibility of the biological mother, but the responsibility of the broader community. (Wane, 2000, p. 107)

These women invoked the language of the family to describe the ties that bind them as African women to their obligations to other members of their family and African community as a family (Collins, 1987). Sociologist Cheryl Gilkes (1980) suggests that community othermothers' relationships are sometimes behind African women's decisions to become community activists. Gilkes notes that "many of the African women community activists in her study became involved in community organizing in response to the needs of their children and of those in their communities" (Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. 50). The following comment is typical of how many of the Black women in Gilkes' study relate to Black children: "There were many summer programs springing up for kids, but they were exclusive, and I found that most of our kids' emphasis and mine is excluded" (as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 191).

For many women, what began as the daily expression of their obligations as community othermothers, as is the case for me and other African women who live in the diaspora, has developed into their full-fledged roles as community othermothers by advocating for the elimination of sexual assault against women most especially for Black women in our community. In Africa the widespread perceptions about sexual assault are complicated; victim blaming, and female fear factory keeps a lot of African women silent. African community activists are advocating for the empowerment of African women in both domestic and public spaces (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/south-africa-rape-nightmare-crime-stats>).

Innocence Lost

Journal reflections and entry:

To my Mother:

April 2017

I'm still haunted by the nightmares, the onus of not speaking out, slowly eating away at me like a filthy leech sucking every ounce of blood in my body. I am lying wide awake in my bed recalling the small upstairs apartment in Festac Town, set far back from the curb, beneath three towering pines. It's covered with white plaster with a brown tile roof, and Castilian wrought iron over the windows. A large piece of land accessible only by a bridge so vast, it would admit more than one car at a time.

Writing to you in my journal might seem a bit redundant, especially since I've been away in Canada for the past two years. Who am I supposed to talk to if not my mother? I have often envisaged how this conversation would go, what would have been your reaction if I had told you I was sexually assaulted at age fourteen. I never spoke to you about it because I didn't understand the implications of what that man had done to my body and self-esteem. I didn't tell anyone because I was afraid no one would believe me. You might ask me why talk now, why not hold it in. I speak because I must. I speak because the burden is too much for me to bear alone.

After the bruises are gone, I am left with humiliation, shame, and filth that sticks to my body like scum. Was it my fault? Did I do anything to draw his attention? Did I dress

inappropriately and was I iniquitous? All these questions I've asked myself repeatedly. Why did he choose to do that to me? Till this day I still don't have an answer to that question.

Mama, I know it's hard to understand, but I was afraid to tell you he groped my breasts in the most horrendous way possible. I remember how his touch made my skin crawl. I recall the shame, guilt, anger and I was riddled with all sorts of emotions going through my head at that moment. I was just a child still trying to navigate the waters of becoming an adult. How do I explain to my mother that Uncle "Collins" a man I had known for most of my life, who was an old friend of the family and often and occasionally visited our home had grabbed my breasts and tried to kiss me without any warning? I barely made it home running out the door of his office. However, I made it back.

Once I was inside the house, I bolted the door behind me. Afraid that he had followed me home, I switched off the light in my room. I recall the warm yellow glow of the sun passing through the curtains and the towering frightening shadow. I held myself tightly. It felt like a storm was raging through my body. My small arm was stiffened against my face. I could not stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks.

I speak because, after 16 years of agonizing over this horrible experience, I have chosen to narrate my own story, rather than let the one Uncle Collins told to persist any longer in my mind. Collins, like most abusers, relied on me not telling anyone, to save his reputation, avoid consequences and keep on abusing. I refuse to be a victim, I refuse to be shamed, and I will not be silenced anymore. I will not let the fetters of self-loathing chip away my confidence. I speak because I want to break these manacles that have held me down for so long. I speak because I want to be free. I speak because I must.

Motherhood as a Symbol of Power

Motherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother, can be invoked by African women as a symbol of power. A substantial portion of African women's status in African communities stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contributions as community othermothers to African community development as well. The specific contributions Black women make in nurturing Black community development form the basis of community-based power. Community othermothers work on behalf of the African community by trying, in the words of late nineteenth-century Black feminists, "uplift the race," so that vulnerable members of the community would be able to attain the self-reliance and independence so desperately needed for Black community development under oppressive conditions (as cited Bell-Scott, et al., 1991).

Yoruba traditions point to the fact that among the Yoruba people, motherhood is said to confer privileges that give credence to the very foundations of society and women's presumed roles in it and thus symbolize fertility, fecundity, and fruitfulness. The Yoruba proverb,

"Iya ni wura, baba ni jigi"

goes a long way in showing the importance of motherhood as a symbol of power in West African society (Akujobi, 2011). This is the type of power many Africans have in mind when they describe the "strong, African women" they see around them in traditional African communities. When older African women invoke this othermother status, its results can be quite striking. They can also exert power as community othermothers (Fields, 1983, p. xvi). In local African communities, specific African women are widely recognized as influential figures, primarily because of their impact on the community's well-being through their roles as community othermothers (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

Savage Queen

Nne walked in through the door of the house, pausing to let her eyes adjust from the harsh sunlight glare to the gloom within, her “gele” is pushed behind her forehead, indicating tiredness from the constant bickering from the women in her church group. I was seated in front of the television, watching a telenovela while I had my food in front of me literally struggling between the television and my food. I was immersed in telenovela land, so I greeted her with the least enthusiasm ever “Aluhwa Nne.”

“Hmmm” she responded. If my head was in the right place at the time I should’ve known that was a terrible sign, but Alejandro and Ruth’s love story got me hooked and about to sink into the never-ending hole of a clap back. I didn’t care about anything or anyone, not even Nne could wake me up from my trans-like state, also as she pushed me out of the way. From the corner of my eye, I saw her slump into her favourite armchair and throw her gele right across the table to me. She was seated far off from me which means she had one footrest beside her to place her gele. But nothing could stop the old woman from avoiding all of those and passing her gele to me.

Still distracted, I grabbed the gele and dropped it beside me. Nne said, “Ewere, go bring water from fridge for me.” I didn’t hear her the first time. I believe I was watching the episode where Alejandro had discovered that Ruth was having an affair with his best friend. He slammed the door behind him, leaving his romantic interest outside the house crying her eyes out in agony. She cried so hard and held her chest tight to keep her heart from breaking into tiny pieces. It was a harrowing time in telenovela land where love conquers all, and I just needed to know if Alejandro (aka the blue-eyed devil) would turn back and make things right with Ruth. Even though I knew how the story was going to end, I still had to know.

Nne called me a second time, “Bim. Bim. Go bring water from fridge,” and I replied, “Ohhh., Nne.” I thought to myself, “She is probably so tired from Nne Emeka’s endless meddling in other people’s business that she felt like drowning in a verbal River Niger.” I stood up from the floor and moved to the television. I picked up the remote control and increased the volume, so I could hear what Alejandro and Ruth were up to from the kitchen. I quickly got the bottled water out of the fridge, poured its content in a glass cup, moved to the living room with the cup in my hand, and stood in front of the television holding the bowl of water. I dropped the water on the table beside me and moved back to my previous position in front of the TV.

The only thing I can remember is the whipping sound her hands made as she slapped me across the face. Boom. The crack of her hands contacting my skin echoed off the walls of the house. Vibrations of pain started on my cheeks and spread all over my face. My cheek was bright red. I stared at her with my eyes wide open as my hands slowly made it to my cheek. That stubborn old woman had sent a mean backhand straight into my direction hitting me smack on the cheek, causing me to bump the sofa next to me. Telenovela land faded swiftly, I returned to real-life, where there was no Ruth or Alejandro and Nne was queen again.

She said to me “When small pikin they dance like crase person, tell am say ‘you they dance like crase person,’ no tell am say ‘nwa, do as you want.’ Next time when person wey senior you enter inside house, leave wetin you dey do and put ya ear down you hear me. The telefision no dey run. You get plenty of time to watch telefision until your eyes start to pain you. As your elder na your duty to wait on me, No be my duty to wait on you.” “Zuzu pum n’iru.” Shock stopped me from moving from the couch. I watched as Nne calmly picked her gele up from the table and strutted to her room like the savage queen she was with a cross side eye. It took me less than a second, but I finally understood what I had done wrong.

Implications for African Mother-Daughter Relationships

In her discussion of the sex-role socialization of Black girls, Pamela Reid identifies two complementary approaches to understanding Black mother/daughter relationships. The first, psychoanalytic theory, examines the role of parents in the establishment of personality and social behaviour. This theory argues that the development of feminine behaviour results from the girls' identification with adult female role models (Reid, 1983). This approach emphasizes how an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood can be actualized through Black mothers' activities as role models. The second approach, social learning theory, suggests that the rewards and penalties attached to girls' childhood experiences are central in shaping women's sex-role behaviour. The kinds of behaviours for which Black mothers reward and punish their daughters is vital in the socialization process. This approach examines specific experiences that Black girls have while growing up that encourage them to absorb an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood (Collins, 1987).

African Mothers as Role Models

Feminist psychoanalytic theorists suggest that the sex-role socialization process is different for boys and girls. While boys learn maleness by rejecting femaleness by separating themselves from their mothers, girls establish female identities by embracing the femaleness of their mothers. As girls identify with their mothers, it incorporates a sense of connection into the female personality; however, this mother-identification is problematic because, men are valued higher than women, under patriarchy. Thus, while daughters identify with their mothers, they also reject them because, in patriarchal families, identification with adult women as mother's means identifying with persons deemed inferior (Chodrow, 1974, Chodrow, 1999; Flax, 1978).

Walking the Distance

It's 6'clock. I just heard the front door slam; Mom has been out all day doing God knows what. I slowly move toward the wardrobe trying to fit my clothes into my luggage before she comes upstairs. Mom says hello. She says it clearly and audibly, but I barely make an effort to turn my head around. Instead, I give her a slight nod, a dismissive flutter of a gesture, roughly in her direction. She stands in the doorway staring at me with her dark brown eyes, so you are leaving? Is your mind made up? "Yes," I reply. "I don't think to go all the way to Abraka is such a good idea," she says. As I turn around to stare at her, her face is held forward with a steady gaze and has an air of authority that is palpable.

As I continue to stare at the beautiful lines on her face, it's hard to remember the good days. All I can think about at that moment is the anger and pain that is in my heart. Why is it so hard to remember the good times, the joy, and laughter we shared? Why is the ache in my heart rearing its ugly head? It feels like a lifetime ago.

I turn around and continue filling my luggage with my clothes. I am twenty and burning with intense passion. My independent spirit and deep-seated anger have been fueled by living with Mom for the past twenty years. I am exhausted by the constant bickering and fights with her that have become our daily routine. I'm leaving home. I need some space to breathe. I am losing my self bit by bit. As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I do not recognize myself anymore.

My thoughts are overcast; my heart is murky with pain and frustration; it feels like my soul is being taken away. I must admit that it scares me to leave everything I know and walk into a world I do not understand, hoping to find out who I am. Letting go of Mom's hands is

one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I am determined I won't be looking back. This is my time, my journey. I must do this my way. I walk in a girl and walk out a woman ready to face the world alone.

“You are leaving my house?” I pulled myself together and answered, “Yes, I am leaving your house.” She smirked, half-pleased and half-concerned. “All right, you are a woman now. You are old enough to know what you want. I can't stop you since your father already agreed with your decision. I want you to remember one thing. From the moment you leave my house, you're on your own. Don't forget where you came from, who you are and the values we taught you.

Whatever relationships you get into don't make concessions or compromises. Stand firm in your beliefs. A bond has to be earned not compromised. When you fall in love, there is nothing to compromise. Love yourself and find someone to share it with; however, keep in mind that Nne (which is what I call my grandmother) and I have given you all you need to live by. Follow what's right. Don't doubt yourself. It is not who you are that holds you back, it is whom you think you are that stands in your way. The only way you can grow as a woman is if you want better for yourself. That's how you've been raised.”

As I reflect on the hurdles I've had to conquer in my adult life, many truths are revealed through this journey. I realize that I have a different interpretation of my mother's life journey even though it was difficult for me to let go of the old preconceived notions I had about her. It has taken me a while to acknowledge that my mother was not perfect; she was human, even though that is not the story I like to tell myself. She lived the life she chose though often sad, depressed and hurt. In the end, I have had to accept that the view I

always had of my mother was that of a child trying to make sense of my internal struggles and my identity.

As an adult, I see my mother as she should have been, through my writing. She has empowered me to say to her, “Mother I love you. I do not see you as I used to. You have had a profound impact on my struggle to own my identity as an African woman.” I have returned to my roots to be liberated and to be accepted. I stand in my womanhood and power, and what stands behind it and what it represents.

Black girls learn by identifying with their mothers, the specification of the female role with which Black girls identify may be entirely different from that modelled by middle-class white mothers. The presence of working mothers, extended family othermothers, and influential community othermothers offers a range of role models that challenge the tenets of the cult of true womanhood. Moreover, since Black mothers have a unique relationship to white patriarchy, they may be less likely to socialize their daughters into their prescribed role as subordinates. Preferably, a crucial part of Black girls’ socialization involves incorporating the critical posture that allows Black women to cope with contradictions. For example, Black girls have long had to learn how to do domestic work while rejecting definitions of themselves as mammies. At the same time, they have had to take on active roles in Black extended families without internalizing images of themselves as matriarchs (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

In raising their daughters, Black mothers face a troubling dilemma. To ensure their daughter’s physical survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression. For example, as a young girl in Mississippi, Black activist Ann Moody questioned why she was paid so little for the domestic work she began at age nine, why their White male employers sexually harassed Black women domestics, and why Whites had so much more than Blacks.

However, her mother refused to answer her questions and became angry whenever Ann Moody stepped out of her place (as cited in Collins, 1987).

Black daughters are raised to expect to work, to strive for an education so that they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential for their survival as well as for the survival of those for whom they will eventually be responsible (Joseph, 1981; Ladner, 1971; Myers, 1980). And yet mothers know that if daughters fit too well into the limited opportunities offered by Black women, they become willing participants in their subordination. Mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival at the high cost of their emotional destruction (Collins, 1987).

On the other hand, Black daughters who offer severe challenges to problematic situations may not physically survive. Many Black mothers routinely encourage their daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions. Thus, learning that they will work, that education is a vehicle for their advancement, can also be a way of preparing Black girls to resist oppression through a variety of mothering roles. The issue is to build emotional strength, but not at the cost of physical survival (Collins, 1987). For example, Wangeci, a single mother, told Njoki Nathani Wane in an interview that she was committed to her daughter:

I will sacrifice my life for this baby. I will do what it takes to make sure that she does not end up like me, no education, no money and no land. At present, I am not sure how I will do it. However, all I know is that her life will be different and better than mine. I let my mother down by dropping out of school; I have to do something that will make her know that her efforts, her sacrifices were not in vain. It appears hopeless now, but I know things will change. (as cited in Wane, 2000, p. 109)

The Right Kind of Woman

“There’s no wrong or right way to be a woman.”

Said, my mother

You must surround yourself

with people that honour who you are as a woman

Staring at the fine line on her face

it fades out of focus never to return

It’s like time stood still and accepted her grace

Her inevitable misery could not be confined

It broke her into little pieces

Triggered by the trauma of her disconnect

In my desire to understand Mama’s pain

I have come to realize that

Mama and I are daddyless daughters

Fettered by the fragmented bonds we share

With our fathers who were never home

We tried to heal our broken hearts

From these shattered relationships

Which broke our mind and soul

No longer controlled by these broken bonds

We will ease our minds

Redefine our purpose

And reclaim our power

Not as women who are consumed by pain

But as women who have traversed

The hurdles placed in front of us with grace

And superhuman strength

She said “you may not be the right kind of woman

But you must prove to them time and time again

There is no wrong or right way to be a woman.”

Historian Elsa Barkley Brown describes the delicate balance between conformity and resistance as “the need to socialize one way and at the same time to give me all the tools I needed to be something else” (as cited in Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. 54). Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those very same structures. Thru developing these skills in their daughters, African mothers demonstrate varying combinations of behaviours devoted to ensuring their daughters’ survival such as providing them with necessities and ensuring their protection in dangerous environments to helping their daughters go farther than mothers themselves were allowed to go (Bell Scott et al., 1991). Nyawira, a woman in her mid-sixties was a participant in Wane’s (2000) research. She has five children who have all completed their secondary education. She spoke of her children with passion:

Although all my children are grown and live in the city, I still prepare large amounts of foods. I recall many times; I would make homemade cookies to go and sell to raise school fees. Sometimes I did not sell even one, and some other times I sold everything. I sacrificed everything I had to put my children through school. My husband had to sell part of our land to raise school fees. However, here I am alone. All my children have moved to the city. I am lonely, but I am happy for them. (p. 109)

The presence of othermothers in Black extended families and the modelling symbolized by community othermothers offer compelling support for the task of teaching Black girls to resist White perceptions of Black womanhood while appearing to conform to them. In contrast to the isolation of middle-class White mother/daughter dyads, Black women-centred extended family networks foster an early identification with a broader range of models of Black womanhood which can lead to a greater sense of empowerment in young Black girls (Collins, 1987).

The Skin I am in, Kinks I Wear

Excerpts from my Journal:

May 2015

Lagos, Nigeria

Which is worse: wanting to be someone I wasn't
or wanting so badly to be comfortable in my skin?

I chose the latter

I've finally decided to go natural

I cut my hair off, and it's liberating

I don't have to hide anymore

I am no longer a girly, girl with silky straight hair

No longer sitting with the creamy crack in my hair

Trying hard not to flinch at the burning sensation on my scalp

Beauty is pain, after all, that's what my Mama used to say

Looking at my brown eyes, pale, dark skin and black hair

I am overwhelmed by happiness and sadness

Happy that my hair no longer defines my femininity

Saddened by the negativity that still embodies my hair

my hair is now the most significant expression of freedom

Here I am, natural hair, Afro, brown skin

Let me embrace it all

I'm creating a new narrative for myself

Not an artifice created by others

My hair is my forte

A way for me to embrace self

In a way, I've never experienced before

I will never again allow my power

and poise to be undermined

Social Learning Theory and Black Mothering Behaviour

Understanding this goal of balancing the needs of the physical survival of their daughters with the vision of encouraging them to transcend the boundaries confronting them sheds some light on some of the apparent contradictions in Black mother-daughter relationships. Black mothers are firm disciplinarians and overly protective parents, yet these same women manage to raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive (Joseph, 1980, Myers, 1980). Professor Gloria Wade-Gayles explains this apparent contradiction by suggesting that Black mothers do not socialize their daughters to be “passive” or “irrational.” Quite the contrary, they socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident. Black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mould their daughters into a whole and a self-actualizing person in a society that devalues Black women. (Wade-Gayles, 1984, p. 12)

Black mothers emphasize protection either by trying to shield their daughters if possible from the penalties attached to their race, class and gender status or by teaching them how to protect themselves in such situations. Black women’s autobiographies and fiction comprise of texts revealing the multiple strategies employed by Black mothers in preparing their daughters for the demands of being Black women in oppressive conditions (Collins, 1987). For example, in discussing the mother-daughter relationship in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Rosalie Troester (1984) catalogues some of these strategies and the impact they may have on relationships themselves:

Black mothers, particularly those with strong ties to their community, sometimes build high banks around their young daughters, isolating them from the dangers of the larger world until they are old and strong enough to function as autonomous women. Often

these dikes are religious, but sometimes they are built with education, family. Or, the restrictions of a close-knit and homogeneous community, this isolation causes the currents between Black mothers and daughters to run deep and the relationship to be fraught with an emotional intensity often missing from the lives of women with more freedom. (p. 13)

Time

I'm stuck at a very crucial moment in time

Trying to figure out why this moment is vital

I've learned to recognize these moments

The time when happiness ensues

The time when sorrow feeds

The time when pain roars

The time when anger broke

The time I was born

The time Mama heard my heartbeat for the first time.

Black women's efforts to provide for their children also may affect the emotional intensity of Black mother/daughter relationships. As Gloria Wade-Gayles points out, "Mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted, but they are rarely affectionate" (p. 10). For far too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection often must wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied (Collin, 1987).

Black daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environments must confront their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love extant in

popular culture and the strict, assertive mothers so central to their lives (Joseph, 1980). For daughters, growing up means developing a better understanding on the daughter's part that offering physical care and protection is an act of maternal love

I Know

I know pain because I see it in your eyes

I know chaos because I felt your tenderness

I know happiness because I see your tears

I found odium because I see how love broke you

I found my way because you led me through the gorge of birth

I found my voice because you speak through me

Historically, one of the most pervasive images of African women has been that of the “super strong, resilient mother who is devoted, self-sacrificing, understanding and wise, her love enduring, unconditional and without error” (Wade-Gayles, 1984). The next passage portrays how our less than perfect othermothers underscore the difficulties of motherhood and the sometimes problematic relationships between othermothers and their daughters. (Bell-Scott, et al., 1991). This poem conveys the anguish of a daughter's attempt to come to terms with her far from a perfect relationship with her stepmother, my growing awareness of being separated from my mother at a very young age, grappling with the idea of having a new mother who I knew next to nothing about. Watching her take over what was once my mother's home. I remember trying to come to grips with my parents' painful separation, the agony of paternal abandonment, and my longing for maternal love.

Stepmother

The pain of your betrayal
cuts deep into my skin
It's hard to love you
A stranger with no name
whose veins are not of my blood
I often wonder what he saw in you
That made him ardour the taste of you
To crave a strange woman
with such wilful passion
your guise is sweet yet cunning
Your eyes are grey yet shifty
I walk into the empty house
With the shadow of my mother's woe
Waiting for a stranger neither of us knows

Othermothers often play central roles in diffusing the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters and in helping daughters understand the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood (Collins, 1987). Renita Weems (1984) describes the women teachers, neighbours, friends, and othermothers that she turned to for help in negotiating a complicated mother-daughter relationship. These women, she notes, “did not have the onus of providing for me, and so, had the luxury of talking to me” (p. 27). A nurturing female of community aunts and grandmother often encircle their daughters to ensure some familiarity in their journey into a world characterized by uncertainty and even hostility. In her essay “One Child of One’s Own,” Alice Walker offers a vision of what Black mother-child relationships can be:

It is not my child who tells me: I have no femaleness White women must affirm. Not my child who says: I have no rights black men must respect. It is not my child who has purged my face from history and her story, and left my story just that, a mystery; my child loves my face and would have it on every page if she could, as I have loved my own parents’ faces above all others. We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are. (Walker 1979b, p. 75)

This special relationship that othermothers have with their daughters can also foster creativity, mothering of the mind and soul, for all involved. It is this gift that Alice Walker (1983) alludes to when she notes, “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they never hoped to see” (p. 240). However, one cannot overlook the work emphasizing a mothers’ influence on her children is how African children affirm their mothers and how significant that affirmation can be in a society plagued by the sexual politics of Black womanhood (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

The Bridge

Yesterday I slid through the subway horde trying to catch a train to Hammersmith and noticed a young woman walking towards me from the other direction speaking my grandmother's native dialect. I stood there for a minute trying to remember the time I spent with my grandmother and how confident and resilient she is at eighty-three years of age. I wonder why, after all these years, what she thinks of me still matters to me. I cannot forget my grandmother. She is my bridge. When I need a shoulder to cry on, she steadies her shoulders long enough for my tears to dry.

As I get home, I rummage through my wardrobe looking for an old suitcase packed with old photos and mementoes preserved for over a decade. The case contains a treasure trove of family photos that have been with me for a long time. I sit down on the floor next to my oversized bed with my legs crossed scanning through my family's photos. As I open the box, a picture falls out, and I pick it up. It is a picture of the summer I was twelve years old. My grandmother is sitting in her favourite chair in our living room, and I am sitting next to her smiling. My grandmother was quite beautiful. She had curls of brown leaf hair and wore red coral beads around her neck and had perfectly manicured nails. "Nne," which is what I call my grandmother due to how much she looks like my mother, is wearing a red and blue patterned Ankara dress, with rainbow-coloured shoes with heels. she seemed to blend into our surrounding perfectly.

As I stare at her photo, I am reminded of home, reminded of a shrewd brown African woman whose orifice holds stories no bookshelf can carry. I remember sizzling hot summer days when I would visit my grandmother's house. The whole family would be sitting in the

living room with our only living grandparent. Such a beautiful afternoon it is, the sun shining through the windows and onto the wooden floors. Admittedly, I could not have asked for a better day and time to hear my grandmother talk about how proud she was of her grandchildren. The adults sit together telling stories of the past, as my cousins and I talk about how great it is living in the city of Lagos, giggling and having fun with the time we were sharing with our grandmother

I wish you could see me now. Are you still proud of me? Do you again sometimes shake your head and smirk at my childishness, turn down your lips to one side when I make foolish mistakes and shout in anger when am trying to outsmart you in a game of “ayo.” When you speak of how important it is for me to wear my confidence around me like a shield and never let anyone bully me into submission I listen with rapt attention. Knowing you, I know you’re still doing all of these and more. I am passionate about my relationship with Mom. She is the one person who looks into my heart and sees me for who I am. You taught me honesty, truth, compassion, and kindness. You also encouraged me to take risks, to confidently go where others were afraid to go.

I miss talking to you. You always frazzled me out with your long conversations. You’d say, “Come and sit down. I want to talk to you.” I would sit down with rapt attention and the next day you would repeat the same story you told me yesterday, and I would say, “Nne, we had this conversation yesterday,” and you would shake your head and say, “I don’t recall.” “But, Nne, I want to play with my friends,” I’d sulk. You’d laugh and pretend not to care and continue with the conversation. You loved me as best you could, even when life was complicated for us. You showed elegance and strength; even at moments when you

should've been discomfited, you stood your ground without flinching. You extended a hand of help to others even when you were in dire need of one. Living far away from you, the light of your wisdom continues to direct my path. I don't think I've said this enough; Nne I will always love you.

June Jordan offers one of the most eloquent analyses of a daughter's realization of the high personal cost African women have paid as bloodmothers and othermothers in working to provide an economical and emotional foundation for Black children. In the following passage, she captures the feelings that Black women struggled to put into words:

As a child, I noticed the sadness of my mother as she sat alone in the kitchen at night. Her woman's work never won permanent victories of any kind. It never enlarged the universe of her mind or her power to influence what happened beyond the front door of our house. Her woman's work never tickled her to laugh or shout or dance. But she did raise me to respect her way of offering love and to believe that hard work is often the fundamental factor for survival, not something to avoid. Her woman's work produced a reliable home base where I could pursue the privileges of books and music. Her woman's work invented the potential for an entirely different kind of work for us, the next generation of Black women: huge, rewarding hard work demanded by the huge, new ambitions that her perfect confidence in us engendered. (as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 189)

Jordan's words not only capture the essence of the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood thus central to the well-being of countless numbers of West African women, they simultaneously point the way into the future one where West African women face the challenge of continuing the mothering traditions carefully nurtured and protected by past generations of West African women (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

In the next chapter, I discuss storytelling as a research methodology. Storytelling is about engaging our relational selves. Therefore, my people say, “the story of one cannot be said without unfolding the story of many.” This approach to storytelling shows how diverse and sometimes contradictory the analysis of the same story is perceived as long as we exercise responsibly. If we relate to each other through storytelling, then our storytelling is a research method. In this paper, I share why and how using stories as a methodology is an effective way to encourage African Indigenous scholars to think about the endemic tools that make their scholarship accessible to our larger Black communities (Mucina, 2011).

Africans have always used the art of storytelling to extol the power of experience as a teaching tool because a story can allow a culture to regenerate itself. As a West African woman, I highlight how to use African storytelling to produce knowledge, by addressing the following topics: What storytelling is, why use storytelling as a methodology, how to address the ethics of using storytelling, the dangers of a single story, Counter-storytelling, African stories and identity. I end by addressing the significance of storytelling to people of African descent (Mucina, 2011).

CHAPTER V

Storytelling as Research Methodology

The way we choose to frame a story is significant (Langdon, 2009). The frame we choose not only determines how the story is received, but it is ultimately responsible for how the story helps us to construct our understanding of the world (Langdon, 2009). Collins (1987) affirms “There is need to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in producing knowledge.” She insists that, “The movement between training as an “objective” social scientist and our daily experiences as African women is jarring. However, reconciling what we have been trained to see as opposites, a reconciliation signalled by my inserting one’s self in the text by using “I,” “we,” and “us” instead of the more distancing terms “they” and “one,” give African women a sense of freedom. Both conceptual stances have allowed scholars to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and feminist consciousness, and to be both a good researcher and an acceptable African woman” (Collins, 2000, p. ix).

When I began writing my work, I was overwhelmed by the fear of committing my beliefs to paper. I pondered on how I could write in a way that reflected the richness of my culture. As Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) rightly states, “How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group of African women? The answer is that I cannot and should not because each of us must learn to speak for herself” (p. ix). While writing my thesis, I came to see my work as being part of a more extensive process, as one voice in a dialogue among people who have no voice. With my work, I hope to recapture an element of voice that is honest, genuine and empowering. More importantly, my hope is that others who are formerly and currently silenced will find their voices (Collins, 2000).

Using storytelling as a research approach allowed me to question that which I perceive (Imbo, 2002). In the troubling of my perception, I entered the realm of phenomenological interpretation; that is, storytelling encourages us to question our interpretation of meaning because interpretation is an ongoing social process that is always occurring within us (Mucina, 2011). The idea of using storytelling as an approach for my research deeply resonated with me when I took a graduate seminar class with Dr. Ardra Cole at Mount Saint Vincent University. The overall purpose of the course was to create opportunities to explore, think deeply about and challenge diverse ways of gaining insights and developing knowledge through research. We were asked to write a research autobiography or personal history account that focused on research experiences inside and outside of formal education settings as a participant, observer, consumer or researcher. This powerful experience of inquiry-based learning that was not named “research” set me on a path to demonstrate the strengthening of the Black mother-daughter bond and what it symbolizes in African culture.

Approaching my research in the form of an autobiographical narrative was the right choice, I could never imagine writing my research about Black mother-daughter relationship diverse from and yet inclusive of the world around me using a traditional research approach. This medium would require me to suppress the emotions of my stories and invalidate vast quantity of my experiences which will help gain insight into my vantage point. In *Bone Black*, bell hooks (1996) states: “The current perspective is always that of the intuitive and critically thinking mind. Sometimes these memories are presented in the third person, indirectly, just as all of us talk about things that way. We look back like we are standing at a distance. Examining life retrospectively we are there and not there, watching and being watched” (p. 2).

In other words, stories allow the individual to become both subject and object of the study in the examination of a social phenomenon (Onoura, 2015), like identity, culture, racism, resisting neo-colonization and help illuminate ideas that traditional approaches cannot.

Consequently, using storytelling as an approach sheds light on a different aspect of a topic that the traditional research approach will never be able to comprehend. It enabled me to gain a different understanding of what Black mother-daughter relationship means through this process.

The catalyst for this storied journey emerged from my quest to share stories of my mother and othermothers who encouraged me to cultivate satisfying relationships with Black men and women, to desire marriage while planning viable options, to become a mother only when ready to do so, but above all, my mothers' insistence on being self-reliant and resourceful. Even though our mothers explored diverse teaching strategies, Black daughters have all been exposed to common themes about the meaning of womanhood in West African culture (Bell Scott et al., 1991).

During this time, I was midway through a graduate seminar class entitled "GSSL 6207 Graduate Seminar in Lifelong Learning" where I became exposed to a sampling of writing research autobiographies. The experience set me on a path to questioning and understanding my vantage point, what prior life experiences, beliefs, and values had shaped my understanding of research in general. I found the process of writing this personal narrative based on my own childhood experiences very valuable. I was surprised by what emerged as my writing progressed.

This experience compelled my interest in wanting to write my stories using African-centered storytelling as a methodology. I read the works of African feminists on the subject of girlhood, and motherhood, I found a variety of literature by Black feminist writers like Mary Weems (2015); bell hooks (1996); Adwoa Ntozoake Onuora (2015); Patricia Hill Collins (2002);

Bell-Scott et al., (1991), Anne Moddy (1976) and Maya Angelou (2009). This process required me to reach deep into my unconscious mind and not question what came from it. Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from a unique perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in practical ways. Inspired by these Black feminists' scholars, I thought there was no better way to establish the experience than to pursue research that would illustrate the role stories have played in teaching, learning, and reconfiguring the dynamics of Black mother-daughter relationships.

Using storytelling as an approach to my research was a suitable place to start my work. Research, like stories, should be accessible, evocative, embodied empathic and provocative (Cole, Knowles, Luciani & Neilsen, 2004). Each incident, encounter, and experience has its own story, sometimes told from the first person, at times told from a fading third person. That the shape of a distinct memory was decided not by my conscious mind but by all that is dark and profound within me, it was the act of making it present, bringing it into the open, so to speak, that was liberating to me (hooks, 1991).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics is all about human relations, and through storytelling, you can speak, perform and write about people, it not only describes the nature of their relationship but also requires and accepts a relation from which the knowledge about human relations can emerge. An individual self always and already is in a world, surrounded and constituted with and by the other with which the self stands in an inherently ethical relation (Buber, 1970). A significant characteristic of stories is the idea that it is constructed in a collective, collaborative manner, which does not support purely individualistic learning. This knowledge brings to view the fact that all community members, including the ancestors who have gone on before us, play a significant role

in this knowledge production. From my perspective, there is an acknowledgement that everyone involved in the community contributes knowledge to storying (Dei, 2005).

Storytellers do not exist in isolation. We live connected to our community which includes mothers, grandmother, othermothers, friends, and children (Adams, Bochner and Ellis, 2011). The community plays a pivotal role in the stories we tell. Storytellers recognize the natives in their community as “knowers,” as the “experts,” and the “knowledge makers” (Dei, 2005). The stories passed down within the community is collective knowledge and is the primary source of knowing (Munroe-Anderson, 2018).

As someone who believes in the significance of storytelling to people of African descent, stories can also become a useful tool for countering dominance both inside and outside the classroom. Currently, in mainstream schools, students are being provided pedagogical tools that come from a particular lens and from a precise perspective (what Audre Lorde calls the master’s tools) so much so that they tend to reproduce the very racist, sexist, classist, patriarchal, homophobic and ableist dominant narrative that reinforces hierarchical power relations. Stories could be amended to fit the current context in a way that allows the classroom practitioner to focus in on issues of marginalization to encourage students to write/retell their stories in a way that speak to their current context. If stories can illuminate the turbulence and tenderness in African mother-daughter experience, these same stories can also insight us on topics such as sexuality, identity and culture, or cultural and neo-imperialism (Onoura, 2015).

Above all, storytelling pedagogies offer a shift from the depersonalization endemic in the types of knowledge production that takes place in formal educational settings and schooling to the extent that it offers a vision of schooling where a community of learners feel comfortable

sharing stories “imbued with emotions and provide as an alternative to mechanistic knowledge production that is privileged in formal educational setting. (as cited in Onoura, 2015)

In colonial/imperial contexts the colonizers lay claim to knowledge, taking possession of it as their own, the stories/storytelling of African-centered Indigenous knowledge belongs to the community, and no one person can claim ownership of it (Wane, 2008, p. 192). Because it is passed on orally, African Indigenous knowledge is stored in mind; and since there are no records, “no one can claim title to it” (Wane, 2008, p. 192). Contrary to colonial knowledge, this collective process of knowledge production makes African Indigenous knowledge “accessible to everyone” (p. 192). The term “Indigenous” denotes that this type of knowledge has continuously accumulated by a community of persons which has had centuries of continued residence in a particular place and have a deep understanding of their place in the world (Dei, 2000, p. 114).

If we share our fragmented stories, we get a fuller and more vibrant picture of our African knowledge, which helps us understand who we are. Africans have always used the art of storytelling to extol the power of experience as a teaching tool. I can use no better teaching tool, as this land mass called Africa is the first story (Mucina, 2011).

Okri (1997) assures us that “Africa breathes stories. In Africa everything is a story; everything is a repository of stories. Spiders, the wind, a leaf, a tree, the moon, silence, a glance, a mysterious old man, an owl at midnight, a sign, a white stone on a branch, a single yellow bird of omen, an inexplicable death, an unprompted laughter, an egg by the river, are all impregnated with stories. In Africa things are stories, they store stories, and they yield stories at the right moment of dreaming when we are open to the secret side of objects and moods. (p. 115)

Storytelling provides me with an opportunity to share and validate the lived experiences of West African mothers and othermothers. The story of using storytelling was here before our people. We were born into the story; we have gained from their stories, we have added to the story, we are sharing this story with you and giving you this story, which was given to us although we will leave the story the story will go on. This story belongs to us; we co-author it. It has no beginning and no end. It is, simply, our story. So, when Africans speak about storytelling, they are speaking about the period during which they were active in our story. (Mucina, 2011)

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) also speaks to the importance of using an interactive process to assess knowledge claims. She says, “New knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through storytelling, and the lived experience of members of a community” (p. 212). Although she directs her comments to African women, Munroe-Anderson (2018) believes that they can also be applied to all people of colour (p. 89). We must learn to connect storytelling and lived experiences, the epiphany of lives, to the groups and social relationships that surround and shape persons. As we write about the lives of others, we bring the world of others into our texts. We create the persons we write about just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices (Denzin, 2013, p. 6). Storytelling implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing language, one that challenges and resists domination (Collins, 1990).

Storytelling and Knowledge Production

Munroe-Anderson (2018) asserts that “the productive quality of stories is its ability to foster change” this makes storytelling the ideal research methodology for my research (p. 89). Knowledge production is conceived through stories; Kovach (2009) states that “In the oral tradition, stories cannot be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a

relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Stories are born of connections within the world and therefore recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for our continuity with future generations. Stories serve an important purpose in these spiritual relationships; by providing “insight into a phenomenon” (p. 94).

Particularly evident in knowledge production as personal is the fact that storytelling is agentic and participatory. Storytellers have never been silent in the face of colonial violence that subverted and neutralized various other forms of resistance; the storytellers and griots have never been idle, working through participatory mediums to maintain and sustain African ways of being and living. Here, the role of the storyteller is central to the exercise of agency and renewal. In African traditions around the world, storytellers are sacred knowledge keepers, they are the elders and medicine people, and they shape communities through the spoken and written word. (Ritskes & Sium, 2013).

Stories are not only agentic and individual; they are communal sharing that bind the community together spiritually and relationally. As Leanne Simpson (2013) tells us: “Spiritual and social practices such as storytelling, the oral tradition, ceremonies, feasting, and gift-giving are designed to bond people together toward a common understanding” (para. 6). Stories have become mediums for African peoples to both analogize colonial violence and resist them in real ways. A kind of embodied reciprocity exists between people and their stories (Ritskes & Sium, 2013). African novelist Ben Okri says that “people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers can make their nations sick. And sick nations make for sick storytellers” (as cited in Parkinson, 2009, p. 31).

Contrary to liberal notions of stories as humanized acts of sharing, we must recognize stories as acts of creative rebellion. Decolonizing the very act of storytelling means breaking

from liberal notions of stories as a culturally diverse ‘show and tell.’ It means closing the false gap that often exists between speaking and acting (Ritskes & Sium, 2013). Lastly, calling upon African Indigenous concepts like Ankh Medu and Kemetic beliefs in the “living word” and others that recognize words as alive inside us, what Somerville (2010) describes as the home fire burning within each person. It is fitting to paraphrase a question asked by Watts (2013): What does it mean to think of words as living acts? Finally, in answering these questions in the affirmative, how will this be reflected in our scholarship? If stories are archives of shared pain, suffering and resistance, then to speak them is to heal; to believe in them is to reimagine the world. The spiritual nature of the spoken word connects the speaker to those in her community, past, present and future, as well as aspects such as the land, nature and a higher power (Munroe-Anderson, 2018).

Through the trans-generational memory transmitted by their stories, Elders ensure the survival and continuance of African epistemic traditions. For many communities under siege by the triangular threats of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalist modernity, storytelling becomes a site and tool for survival (Ritskes & Sium, 2013). Trask (1999) reminds us that “surviving as an African person in any colonial situation is a strange mix of refusal, creation, and assertion” (p. 89) and that is what these stories are, part of that same strange mix. Stories have been taken up in recent literature as a form of oral history, but what Watts (2013) demonstrates is that these stories also carry African and Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, and theories within their narratives; as she states, “It is more than a lesson, a teaching, or even a historical account. Their conscious and knowing agreement directly extends to our philosophies, thoughts and actions” (p. 26). The spoken word provides us with the freedom to be our multi-storied selves; it is

unyielding and unrestrictive to one single history, life experience, option, reality, or perspective of the world (Rodriguez, 2011).

The Dangers of a Single Story

In recent years, the subject of the dangers of telling a single story from the dominant's perspective has received much attention as scholars and practitioners affiliated with ethnography, oral history, and related social science approaches struggle to articulate the social, historical, and political mechanisms that privilege specific memories and ways of remembering over others (Shahzad, 2012 & Olick, 2008). Within the resulting body of literature, the collective narrative also referenced as dominant or official story is frequently approached as "a formidable coercive process that induces the individuals to coalesce with the dominant one" (Ryan, 2010, p. 159).

African-centred storytelling problematizes, resists, and rejects the telling of a single story about African people from a Western perspective and through research, allows people of African descent to speak for and represent themselves (Munroe-Anderson, 2018). Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), explores the power of ambiguity, particularly in further marginalizing colonized peoples in her lecture entitled, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). In this presentation, Adichie discusses how people, specifically African people, have been dispossessed of our multiplicity of stories because one story, created about us by the dominant voice, has been enforced on us and its negative ideology perpetuated globally (Adichie, 2009). Adichie (2009) also argues, that "Literature is the main culprit for the projection of the single story. Historically, through Western literature and the media, a single story has been created about groups of people and the dehumanizing elements of monovocalism, and the absence of balance of stories robs people of their self-respect" (p. 3).

The danger of telling a single story is that it makes us lazy. We fail to question the assumptions of the dominant narrative. We fail to question our assumptions. The dominant story and its accompanying ideologies remain untouched, unexamined. Instead of doing the real work of digging deep, we tinker at the edges, perhaps dressing up the stories in the latest hot concept, or adding a funky groove to it (Turner, 2016). Chilisa (2012) warns, “Not all stories are valuable to the building of communities. Some stories are written from the perspective of the powerful and is therefore oppressive” (p. 139).

It is impossible to talk about the dangers of a single story without talking about power (Adichie, 2009). Power is not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that “If you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their stories and to start with “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have a completely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have a different story” (Adichie 2009, p. 4).

Rather than falling into the trap of a single story, Chilisa encourages researchers to “critique androcentric, anthropocentrism, racist, heterosexual-centred or ethnically biased and stigmatizing stories that build communities on foundations of exclusion, silencing, exploitation, and oppression” (p. 139). It is impossible to connect with a person without connecting with all the stories of this person (Adichie, 2009). As a child growing up in Nigeria I had a very cohesive extended family; I was raised by African women who have been a significant part of my childhood experience, always happy and full of laughter and love for one another. However, I also had family members who died during the Nigerian civil war. I grew up hearing stories about

how the Nigerian government bombed several cities indiscriminately killing innocent civilians, the loss of my grandmother's brother to the war, the corrosion of the traditional and cultural rights of our family, and folklore that have been passed down from generation to generation. I also grew up under an exploitive Military and democratic regime that devalued our Naira and destroyed the Nigerian economy.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie rightly states, "All of these stories have made me who I am today. However, to insist on only the negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook many of the experiences that have formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (p. 5). It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all the stories of that place and that person (Adichie, 2009). Just as it is important to acknowledge an individual as being multi-storied, it is equally critical to recognize the significance of the notion of a collective story. The collective story helps people of African descent to remember our heritage, and our spirituality (Mucina, 2011).

Within storytelling the individual and community connect and, in this way, critical regeneration and honest self-criticism can occur while the community is engaged in the creation of a collective vision (Mucina, 2011). The comfort and discomfort produced by these storying conversations are crucial. In such communication, solutions to difficulties faced by the community and creative strategies for community growth can be pursued collectively. Moreover, as people share various experiences in storytelling, teaching takes place, and listeners learn (Mucina, 2011). When we reject the concept of a single story and accept that there is never a single story about a place or a people, we regain a kind of paradise and regain our dignity as a people (Adichie, 2009).

Counter-Storytelling

Counter-stories aim “to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado and Stefancic 1995, p. 144). They offer a perspective that both “help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” (p. 41). Richard Delgado, who introduced the concept, argues that “Counter-stories can quicken and engage the conscience, stirring the imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). Counter-stories can show us that what we believe is inaccurate or false; they can highlight exclusionary practices and policies. Delgado believes that they can even “help us understand when it is time to reallocate power” (p. 2415).

Counter-storytelling challenges the accepted ideology, the dominant ideology. And last, storytelling can teach people about how one can construct both story and reality. The narrative that focuses on the marginalized can, therefore, empower the storyteller as well as those who listen (Rodriguez, 2006). As Delgado argues, “members of outgroups can use stories as a means of psychic self-preservation as well as lessening their subordination. By coming to an understanding of our oppression, members of outgroups can heal. By writing these stories, this can lead members of outgroups to stop perpetrating mental violence on themselves” (as cited in Rodriguez 2006, p. 1070).

According to Delgado (1989), these counter-stories serve several theoretical and methodological purposes. First, they can build a sense of community among those at the margins of society by providing a space to share their sense of reality and experiences. Stories build consensus, a shared culture of shared understandings. Second, stories can challenge the dominant

perspective. In Delgado's words, "narratives are a powerful means of destroying mindset" (p. 2413).

The writings of Black feminist scholars (Angelou, 1969; Bell-Scott's, 1991; Collins, 2002; hooks, 1996; Onoura, 2015; Weems, 2015) affirm the socio-political importance of storytelling to oppressed people. Within the North American context, African people continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. Our stories become particularly important because, as Dalia Rodriguez explains, they function as a means of psychic self-preservation, for lessening subordination, understanding, and healing from oppression. Rodriguez also asserts that our stories "can illuminate the material and social conditions that provide a means to usher in social change" (as cited in Onoura, 2015, p. 2).

Despite these scholars theorizing on the significance of storytelling for the oppressed, our stories remain marginalized and devalued within formal spaces of learning. Often rooted in oral literary traditions, Indigenous storytelling is either dismissed or subject to credibility tests by so-called experts. Notwithstanding these challenges, marginalized people continue to give voice to stories. As researchers within the academy, we continue to use our stories as spaces from which to enact resistance (hooks, 1990 cited in Onoura, 2015). Researchers have explored storytelling as a means of knowing among African women. Wilson and Washington (2007) advocated its use as a method for guiding research with African women. They argued that stories encourage an active dialogue with women who come from marginalized communities, because "storytelling assists these women in developing their voice and describing their experiences in a way that feels comfortable and safe" (p. 64).

Counter-stories serve to build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human face to educational theory and practice; they challenge the perceived wisdom of

those at society's centre by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems. Counter-stories open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and how they are not alone in their position, and they teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Brigham (2013) asserts that "counter-storytelling is different from fictional storytelling. Whereas traditional ways of knowing ignores race, it is important that counter-stories challenge elements of oppression facing Black women in formal education if it is ever to be taken seriously" (p. 123). With the ascribed marginal status, Black women have developed resistant navigational skills to succeed in higher education (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Many of these skills are not adaptive nor conformist but instead emerge from resistance to domination and oppression in a system that devalues Black women's experiences and knowledge. Moreover, some Black women may choose to situate themselves on the margins (hooks, 1990). As hooks (1990) argues, more is known about the margin as a site of oppression and that we need to understand the margins as both sites of oppression and sites of resistance, empowerment, and revolution. Many students use their "strategic voice" (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998), calculating at every step of the way as to when to speak and when not to speak.

Recognized as one of the essential traditions of African culture (Banks-Wallace, 2002), storytelling demonstrates the significance that the researcher places on the cultural traditions of the community and their lived experiences (Chapman, 2005). Historically, African peoples, in general, have engaged explicitly in storytelling to have a 'voice' in an environment which was designed (consciously and unconsciously) to silence them (Gates, 1989). Counter-stories provide

an opportunity to legitimize the voices of African women in formal education discourses.

Counter-storytelling is different from fictional storytelling. I am not developing imaginary characters that engage in fictional scenarios. Instead, the “composite” characters that have developed are grounded in real-life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real-life, not fiction (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

African Stories and Identity

Chawla (2011) says, “A people without stories are a people without a history. They are people who could very well be obliterated from the earth because their stories are invisible and unheard” (p. 16). “Stories do not only articulate a people’s history, but they also articulate a people’s identity and their reality, which in truth, connects intimately to their history. The power of oral tradition manifests itself in stories that reclaim and confirm cultural identity and self-identity” (Nabavi, 2006, pp. 175, 178). “It is through stories that we remind ourselves of who we are and where and to whom we belong” (Kovach, 2009, p. 94).

Storytelling is a part of my culture. It is a form of educating the children in the traditions and culture of their people. I agree with Wilson (1996a). My grandmother’s stories are the essential core of my being. The stories she has told are cultural, traditional, educational, political and spiritual. Her stories contain essential teachings that pass down historical facts, traditions and life lessons. Traditionally, stories and storytelling are used for the same reasons: to teach values, morals and the history of our people.

Wilson (1996a) writes that: “Stories have served some crucial functions for African and Indigenous people around the globe: The historical and mythological stories provide a moral guideline by which one should live. They teach and remind the young what behaviour is appropriate and inappropriate in their cultures. They provide a sense of identity and belonging,

situating community members within their lineage and establishing a relationship with the rest of the natural world” (p. 4). The practice of storytelling is prevalent throughout various Indigenous African communities across the globe. For African people, stories have served as a central medium for the articulation of culture, history and ancestral memory. Storytelling is a valuable tool for the celebration and reclamation of our African heritage. The narration continues to serve as a platform for resisting neo-colonialism and various forms of social oppression (Banks-Wallace, 1998).

Historically, storytelling consisted of the griot, a storyteller, and a highly respected oral historian who told stories to other community members (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The griot has an essential role in traditional African society as this person had the responsibility of ensuring that the connection between the cultural and historical past and present continued (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The relationship between the griot and others in the community is essential to the stories that were being produced by this union. From an African-centered perspective, stories signify relationships and bear witness to the spiritual/relational ontology, axiology, and epistemology prevalent among people of African descent (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009). “Generally, African peoples relate to each other through stories and as storytelling helps us to engage in a sincere way, a manner that reflects the spiritual nature of our connections to each other in our daily lives” (Mucina, 2011 p. 8).

According to Munroe-Anderson (2018) the research speaks to the reality that stories also “give voice” not only to cultural identity but also to an array of cultural, social and political, artistic and lexical systems, which Nabavi (2006) says “have long been muted by the colonialism and cultural imperialism experienced by marginalized peoples for hundreds of years” (p. 179). From anti-racist and Critical Race Theory perspectives, Clover (2006) and Brigham (2013) agree

that “Since racism is difficult to experience, discuss, and transform due to the pain, guilt, and reproof involved in such encounters, using the arts is often an effective way of engaging learners. Learners become engaged in dialogue, critical and creative thinking, interacting, and racially connecting in new ways” (Brigham, 2013, p. 125). With the liberation of voice and the story comes the liberation of all forms of embodied expressions of marginalized peoples. “Stories present a space where justice can be measured out to marginalized people who have suffered generations of identity distortion” (Nabavi, 2006, p. 180). Smith (1999) reminds us that although our stories have been spaces of marginalization, “They have also become spaces of resistance and hope” (p. 4)

Storytelling, as an interactive process, has given African women a way to explain pivotal life events, justify choices, examine reality and find meaning in experiences (Banks-Wallace, 1999; Carter, 1995; Chinn & Kramer, 2008). Chinn and Kramer wrote: “The story has exquisite value as a frame from which to explore avenues of understanding and meaning, to shift experiential ground and create visions for the future” (p. 162). Emancipatory functions of storytelling have been identified as contextual grounding, bonding with others, validating and affirming experiences, venting and catharsis, resisting oppression and educating others (Grassley and Nelms, 2009).

Critical race theorists assert that storytelling as a research method has significant transformative potential particularly for people of colour (Solorozo & Yosso, 2002). Storytelling is a political act bringing the storytellers of colour from the margins to the centre with the potential of empowering the storyteller as well as the listener (Delgado, 1988, 1989). The stories of people of colour (which are often untold) can challenge the meritocratic, colour-blind, and liberal grand narratives that assume to speak for the majority (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando,

2002). These stories include parables, histories, and stories of research participants (Closson, 2010, p. 267). Such stories serve to trouble traditional ways of research in mainstream education, which limit our understanding of the learning experiences of marginalized learners and in turn limit their educational opportunities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Stories of the experiences of people of colour reveal “the complex routes, cul-de-sacs and dead ends which educational equity and access decisions have travelled” (Closson, 2010, p. 268). Further, storytelling “can serve as a means for researchers to create collective transformational spaces, co-constructing knowledge about self, further deepening our understandings about the role of race while in the field” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 1). Stories about oppression can guide us through understanding that oppression, in a sense, heals us. Autobiographical writing essentially legitimizes the individual experiences and perspectives of individuals excluded from the dominant discourse. Storytelling seeks to expose and subvert the dominant discourse (Rodriguez, 2006).

The Significance of Storytelling to African People

The initial idea I had for a possible thesis topic was on intersectionality and inclusion for all oppressed and why African women do not identify with feminism. However, in the face of all these potential avenues of exploration, I kept returning to wanting to tell my own story, my experiences through childhood, adolescence and adulthood, what it means to be a visible minority, not having my voice, and honouring the women who have had such a strong positive influence in my struggle to embrace my identity.

Onuora (2015) states that “African women have been resisting and learning how to navigate the spoken and unspoken poetics of racism and self-identity that reconstituted us as always mummies, jezebels, and welfare queens” (p. 5). It was only after writing a personal

narrative on the beliefs and values that have shaped my identity as an African woman in that class that I finally began to consider writing an autobiographical narrative as my thesis. I was astonished to see how Dr. Ardra Cole, who was my Professor at the time, was able to embrace my writing which was an autobiographical story on my grandmother's experiences during the Nigerian civil war. Apart from telling a story which was very meaningful to me, I sensed that she was genuinely moved by a compelling story that illustrated the role of narrative in teaching, learning, and meaning-making. In her words:

Your story not only teaches you about your family, people, and culture but inspires you to make a difference; it also provides a powerful mechanism through which to explain, learn and inquire. I can see the clear connection between your early experiences with your grandmother and the role that stories play in how you make sense of the world.

(Cole, Personal Communication, February 6, 2017)

It began to dawn on me that writing an autobiographical narrative on my childhood experiences and the women who have had such a strong positive influence in my struggle to create a self, embracing the otherness, and my identity could be feasible. Writing my thesis using storytelling as a research approach was a natural choice for me because I would address this topic with all the heart and representations of my lived experiences that make the method such a valid form of inquiry.

Wilson (1998) states that "Stories in oral tradition have served some necessary functions especially for Indigenous and African people around the globe" (as cited in Smith, 2001, p. 24). By merely thinking about these questions, I can hear my grandmother's voice telling me stories. My grandmother talks about where she was raised, she speaks of the civil war, the loss of her brother to the war, the traditional and cultural rights of our family, and about our folklores that

have been passed down from generation to generation. She tells me why it is vital for African women to value education and be self-sufficient. She reminds me of how important it was for her, the first female in her family and her community, to get an education at a time when women were relegated to the kitchen.

I can hear my grandmother remind me of the sacrifices she had to make to regain her self. Being married off at an early age, becoming a widower, getting a scholarship to study education in England and building her own house was a feat most women at the time would only dream of accomplishing. I feel blessed by God that she could share her stories with me. Just as my grandmother's stories have stuck with me for years, storytelling has played a significant role in nurturing and educating me as a child. As an adult, I have realized the importance of stories. Narration can quickly contain autobiographical components of storytellers, even when the story features the narrator, ancestors, families, relatives, or communities (Chang, 2008).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2001) suggests that:

Stories tell of love and sexual encounters, of war and revenge. Their themes say about our culture. Stories employ familiar character and motifs which can reassure as well as a challenge. Familiar characters can be invested with the qualities of an individual or can be used to invoke a set of shared understanding of our histories. (p. 146)

My research started from a place that recognizes the importance of storytelling to African people around the globe. As a West African woman who has struggled with her self-identity in a profoundly racist, sexist, classist context, our stories need to be told in a world that has denied our educational agency (Onoura, 2015). The stories that I represent are a fusion of the struggles, joy, and sadness that accompany three generations of West African women who have had a positive influence in my life. Their stories are inspired by what hooks (2008) calls "the longing

to tell one's story, and the process of telling is symbolically a way to recover the past in a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of freedom" (p. 128). It was the longing for release that compelled me to write, but, concurrently, it was the joy of meeting that enabled me to see that writing an autobiography was a way to find that aspect of self that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present (hooks, 2008).

Writing an autobiographical narrative was a way for me to draw out my experiences of growing up in an African community. To take back the richness of my African culture and bring it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. The need to muse over and hold on to the legacy of my experience and what it taught me has become more significant since I have since moved to a predominately white country.

Johnnetta B. Cole in her preface in *Double Stitch* affirms that.

Black women never consciously come to grip the turbulent relationship between Black mothers and their daughters. What is it about the relationship between Black women that is potentially problematic? Perhaps it is quite simply that which haunts every mother and her daughter. Daughters ask, how can I be of this woman and yet resist being dominated by her? Blessed are those mothers who are courageous enough to help their daughters find those answers. (Bell Scott et al., 1991, p. xv)

As I have outlined previously, the primary theme I explored in my autobiographical narrative is the Black mother and daughter relationship. It was vital for me to centre the voices of African women who have been traditionally silenced in mainstream educational discourses. Worth noting are the writings of Black women like Patricia Hill Collins (1987, 1991, 1994, 2000b), Maya Angelou (1969), Adwoa Ntozake Onuora (2015) and Bell hooks (1996) who not

only cemented ideas that motherhood has been and continues to be a site of empowerment, resistance, and agency (particularly for African women and the children they mother), but also ruptured the Eurocentric, patriarchal and gendered conceptualizations of motherhood (Onoura, 2015).

The skewed power relations that have resulted from the past 500 years of European and African contact have resulted in a one-dimensional perspective of our story. The dominant Eurocentric narrative has continuously assumed the right to tell their own stories and everyone else's and from a solely one-dimensional perspective. The resulting Eurocentric stories are always incomplete and often distorted and consequently untrue (Asante, 1987; Banks, 1992). This confirms Asante's (1990) argument that Eurocentric research paradigms possess an intrinsic impediment due to the reluctance of Eurocentric thinkers, to see that human actions cannot be understood apart from the emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context. Afrocentrists and other scholars readily acknowledge that the relationship between race and theory, as related to the production of knowledge, has always been a troubled one (as cited in Reviere, 2001, p. 717).

From an Afrocentric perspective, it was vital for me to situate my African ideals and values at the centre of my inquiry and from which, we can analyze and criticize the rules governing Eurocentric inquiry that prevents accurate explanations of African and other non-European experiences (Asante, 1990). I use these stories to transform ideas about what is considered valid knowledge. Telling stories about West African women whose relationships are a site of empowerment rooted in African conceptualizations of motherhood, dislodges the dominant Eurocentric logic.

Several themes emerged from these stories. The first is that the relationship between African mothers and daughters is remarkably diverse, despite similarities that bind us together as African women. There are profound differences based on age, class, and values. Because of how African mother-daughter relationships differ, they are shown in various forms and stages of development. Mothers and daughters can be accomplices or competitors; their relationship can be synergistic or parasitic and can be rivals and the closest of friends (Bell-Scott et al., 1991). The second theme shows that African mothers are an important site of cultural retention. As creators of knowledge, African mothers and community/othermothers actively engage in challenging Eurocentric narratives on African motherhood. One concept that has been constant throughout the history of African society is the centrality of motherhood in religions, philosophies, and social institutions (Bell-Scott et al., 1991).

The third theme clearly shows that mother-daughter relationships must be nurtured if we are to survive and develop in positive ways. I know this, in part, because of the turmoil present in the lives of African women who never consciously come to terms with this powerful relationship (Bell-Scott et al., 1991). As a daughter of an African woman, this relationship is central to acknowledging my struggle to create a self, embracing the otherness, and survival. These stories show the amount of affection, tenderness, and turmoil which characterizes African mother-daughter relationships. My account challenges how we view Black mother-daughter relationships. One-way African mothers, othermothers, and daughters can be lauded through storytelling.

I used my autobiographical stories as a way of examining the strengths and vulnerabilities of three generations of West African women who have influenced me in many ways. Writing this autobiographical narrative has helped me to appreciate and to communicate

with these women on a more authentic level. This research tells us much about the “turbulence and tenderness” which characterizes African mother-daughter relationships at various points in the life cycle. And in a challenging way, it leaves unexplored territories. “Blessed are those mothers who are courageous enough to help their daughters find answers” (Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. xv).

CHAPTER VI**I Come from a Tribe of Women**

I mutter under my breath trying to gulp up a mouthful of air.

“Breathe Abimbola, breathe you can do this

You have prepared for this your whole life

Work your pen and fingers

Let the echo of the “*iyálu*” drum give you words

Which your mothers have rooted in your belly

Slowly tilting my head up

I scribble on my pocket-sized notebook

Mothers, daughters and othermother: stories that

Several years ago, if someone had told me that I would be writing stories about my mother, grandmother and othermothers I would have laughed hysterically and said, “your head no correct.” I wrote this work to honour my women tribe, women whose voices have been silenced in formal educational discourses and society as a whole. My opus is a way for me to reflect on my experiences of daughterhood, motherhood, and reflect on my girlhood experience of being raised by a tribe of strong women. These lessons are filtered through my cultural lens as a Nigerian woman from a middle-class family, having spent most of my life living in an inner-city and other rural spaces and education which includes experiences in and outside the classroom.

As writer Alice Walker puts it: Telling of stories, which come from our mother’s lips is as natural as breathing, her face as she prepares the art that is her gift, is a legacy of

respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life She has handed down respect for the possibilities and the will to grasp them. (Bell-Scott, 1991, p. 203)

When people ask me why I seem more maternally affiliated to my women tribe: “Why write stories about your mother and othermothers.? Why neglect your fathers. Did they not nurture you too?” I answer with a smile on my face. I come from a tribe of women who nurtured and fostered my creative spirit, they are the storytellers of my tribe, they know the year I broke my arm, the time I twirled my knee while running to catch the “*okuko*” running around our backyard, they live and breathe the stories that I write. I was raised by a tribe of women who risked their lives to bring food supplies to their husbands and brothers during the civil war, women who sold their red “agate” beads and “aso-oke” to raise money for their family’s survival when their men were not around to support them. I know these women, and I have seen them more than anyone else. I will not conceal the stories of my women tribe; I will not belittle their sacrifices in a society that invalidates African women’s experiences.

I come from a tribe of women
 Who are not afraid to stand out
 When others are cowering in fear
 I was raised by a tribe of women
 Who ran among bristled thorns
 But, did not halt to check their lesions

I come from a tribe of Nigerian women, well-groomed pretty brown women, their eyes are gentle, and their words are stern like graceful dunes and golden sands. They are neither privileged nor poor. They are like “*iyun*” beads found beneath the sun-drenched palm trees of “*Ilé-Ifẹ*” if you wanted one you had to dig the hard, gritty ground. I consider myself fortunate to

have had the support of my women tribe. I refuse to take credit for this work, for I recognize that my accomplishments have been attained through the unconditional support of my tribe of women, whose lips possess stories no bookshelf can convey. Stories which I have absorbed from their mouths have impacted my thoughts, my understanding and my cultural perspectives. When reflecting on my learning journey, I pause to honour my tribe of Nigerian women without whom this work would have been a quaking forest road with no hedges to protect it.

Alice Walker (1983) aptly phrased it: mothers, grandmothers and aunts have, more than often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they never hoped to see, or like a sealed letter they could not have read. So many of the stories I write that we all write are our mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this, that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner of which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories like her life must be recorded. (p. 243)

As a woman who continues to contend with the aching of paternal abandonment and the struggle to embrace my identity as a Nigerian woman, my turbulent relationship with my mother was in some ways allayed by my relationship with my othermothers. It is not that my mother did not love me enough; however, she had so much going on in her life, that she could not see the pain and hurt I carried. So, I learned to lean on my tribe of women who stood by me pushing me forward to ensure I did not wallow in a sea of despair. I thrived, I forgave, I tried to heal, and tried to love myself again. Gloria Joseph affirms that "When a young woman struggles for independence, the turbulent stream is kept from overflowing, however, by spillways in the form of other adult women who helped guide and form the young girls, thus relieving some of the

pressure on African mother-daughter relationship. These women who I call othermothers are grandmothers, aunts or cousins united by kinship with blood mothers” (as cited in Troester, 1984, p. 13)

I come from a tribe of women
Like rivers of golden corn
When they are outside, it's dark
When they are inside
You see that each tribe has its place

As I stand in my kitchen trying to make garri and okra soup for myself, I have a moment when I stop, smile and remember my tribe of women who raised me. Women who were not afraid of muddying their hands through hard work. Women who sacrificed their time, yet never complained or gloated about what they did. My tribe of women taught me what selfless and unconditional love is. These women taught me how to walk away from things that were not destined for me, I learned how to move on when the world was against me, and I learned that heartbreak and failure do not define me; what distinguishes me is how well I rise above the hurdles placed in front of me.

Troester (1984) asserts that othermothers provided a safety valve and sounding board and released the teenage girl from the confines of a single role model. They can be gentle and affectionate where bloodmothers must be stern and demanding, thus showing the diversity open to African womanhood. (p. 13)

Growing up in my grandmother's house I watched these women wake up early in the morning to go to the farm and harvest the “ohun elo.” They swept the floors with broomsticks and prepared breakfast for the whole family. Women who hopped on bikes to go to their place of

work and school. Women who were not afraid to stand up for their beliefs. Now, as an adult, as I prepare my meal in my living room, I cannot help but reflect on my tribe of Nigerian women. These incredible women, who are proud of me and all I have accomplished, women who thought about the importance of educating the girl child, about being an independent woman. Most importantly they lived what they preached. Through my tribe of women, I was able to convey the power in the words they possessed to create a written work of pleasant memories.

Paule Marshall (1983) confirms the same sentiments I carry about my tribe of Nigerian women. In her words, Marshall states:

Her career was preceded by another set of giants whom she always acknowledges before all others. The group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lesson in the narrative of art. They trained my ears. They set a standard of excellence. Therefore, the best of many works must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the workshop of the kitchen. (p. 243)

This tribe of women who raised me might not have given birth to me, but I must honour my women tribe. I have grown to understand and accept that everything I learned about life I learned from my women tribe. Everything I discovered about womanhood I learned to from my tribe of women. They were my first teachers and role models. I often wondered where I would be without these tribe of brown women, who matched together into the firestorm when enemies tried to break their bond. Who would I have become without their guidance? Our relationship was filled with laughter and turmoil, sometimes controlling, sometimes filled with silence, but we also loved each other in more ways than one. Miriam Dacosta-Willis in *Double Stitch* describes the relationship between othermothers and daughters perfectly:

They were uppity Black women, our mothers, aunts and grandmothers, women who tossed their heads and crossed their legs, read Fanon and dealt with dream card, wore felt head huggers and hightop shoes. Bold, audacious women of indomitable spirit who believed all things are possible, they taught their daughters respect for the possibilities in themselves and others. They took the raw fabrics of their lives, rough linings of dark secrets, deep longings, and special memories; tough cotton battings of family, work and church; and the appliqued piece work of their dreams and creative spirit and bound them together with delicate blind stitches and strong, bias-cut bindings. (Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. 173)

Ever so often when in a dark place

I think I've been buried alive

But, I've been rooted

Rooted by my mother's sisters

In the dark we held hands

Unperturbed in the skew of darkness

Primed to disrupt our lives

We held on to each other without fear

While òkùnkùn came to break our oath

Imole arose to clear our paths

As we drifted endlessly towards Osun's shore

Breaking the Cycle of Trauma

Bless the daughters who sat carrying the trauma of mothers.

Who sat asking for more love

And not getting any

Carried themselves to light.

Bless the daughters who raised themselves.

(Ijeoma Umebuonye, 2016)

As a young adult trying to navigate the pitches of adulthood. I always had a sense of loss creeping up on me every time my mother spoke about my father. I felt like a giant mound was gradually growing inside of my chest which made me resent her even more. This mound could not be broken; I did not know how to control the next boulder rolling down the hill to crush me. What did I do? I sneered at the mound. I kept it under lock and key never to see the light of day again. I thought I had everything under control now that I think about it I thought I had a tough life, I thought I had it harder than most people. Being separated from my father at an early age, and the sudden demise of my mother's marriage years later only worsened our relationship.

According to Wallerstein and Corbin (1989),

One-third of the mother-daughter relationships that had been mutually loving and supportive within the intact family faltered badly after the divorce. In one subgroup, the impairment in post-divorce parenting was due to mental and physical decline in the mother-daughter relationship. The disruption of nurturing functions in these homes often coincide with the daughter's adolescence and contributed to the morbid sense in many girls of having been abandoned at a critical time in their lives. (p. 598)

The crack in our relationship exposed a sudden fear and refusal to be like my mother. From early on I perceived her as having low self-esteem, broken and narrowed by her marriage, the foreseeable gloom was not helped by the fact that years later my mum had a severe mental breakdown which was triggered by the stress of her separation. I was forced to become an adult; I was no longer a little girl; I was ashamed to be a woman; I felt women were feeble. I did not want to be that woman. I had convinced myself that Mama and I had nothing in common, that we were just two separate entities sharing the same space. However, I was lying to myself. Mama and I had one thing in common. I did not want to concede to it, because yielding to it would mean I was weak. For years I dwelled with the same impasse. In the process of justifying the path I had chosen, I rejected my mother. I despised all that she was and all she could be. In my selfishness, I thought she was not good enough, and I continuously pointed out the hopelessness of her life. According to Wallerstein “more often, mother-daughter relationships worsen as daughters in these families became burdened with responsibility for the physical and emotional needs of their mothers, to the girls it becomes a severe detriment” (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989, p. 598).

Forgiveness

I forgive myself for believing mama was feeble

I forgive myself thinking mama was flawed

I forgive myself for being mad at mama

I forgive myself for not telling her the truth

Truth is she did the best she could

With what was given to her

But it wasn't enough

I forgive you, mama

The whole difficult dynamic began to change for me when I started writing my thesis in November 2017. Having identified the places of my established pain and helplessness I wanted to return to my roots, I wanted to go back to a place where my notions of African womanhood were created. In order to understand myself and my mother's journey, I suddenly felt the urgent desire to understand my mother's history, and in my desire to know her I have come to realize that my mother and I are both "daddyless daughters." Our fathers were never home; we were forsaken by the people we loved the most. I felt this connection with my mother, I have held this in so much that I have tried to talk about it, but no one listened.

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) states,

sometimes, shaky mother-daughter relationships are resolved as the daughter matures.

Betty, at age seventeen, told us, "I stopped being angry at my mother for not living in a house with a white picket fence when I realized, when I was sixteen, that not all the girls I knew who had the white picket fence and you know, the whole bit was better off than me." (p. 598)

I have held the pain in for so long and tried to fill the void I have always felt with unhealthy relationships and things. I have tried to bury the pain and be altruistic giving so much of myself to others and not caring about myself. I am still trying to heal myself from broken relationships which have impacted my identity strongly. It changed the development of my perception and influenced the way I feel about myself. My father had the most profound impact on my identity as a woman. He held the key to my self-confidence and the way I beheld myself. How do I heal, redefine and reclaim my power back as a woman? How do I know what I deserve when I have never had it? Am I ready to stand for myself and say enough is enough? How do I

connect with myself to break this cycle of trauma caused by paternal abandonment? (Vanzant, 2013).

When the pain is thru
The truth is bare
The wounds are stitched
The scars are healed
The words come forth
And the stories take flight

Walking a while in my mother's shoes, many truths were revealed to me even though it was difficult for me to let go of old prejudiced notions I had about her. It has taken me a while to acknowledge that we are both struggling to overcome the fettered chains that gave us so much agony. Even though that is not the story I like to tell myself, I say to myself that it does not matter to me, but I know it is a lie. In the end, I have come to accept that the view I had of my mother was my often groundless expectation of her. After all these years of struggling to understand my mother's life journey, I see her as she should have been through my writing. Linda Hollies offers one of the most retrospective analysis of how I see my mother through my work:

My mother was a woman with hopes and dreams before she became a mother and wife. My unfounded expectations of her kept us at a distance for many years. I wanted her to be perfect for me, but she was human. She lived the life she chose, but often she was sad, disappointed, and hurt. She wanted her own "Prince Charming" she never got him. She wanted a "perfect" daughter. She never got that either. She failed as a wife, but this was

not her number one priority in life. She chose to be a mother. I am grieving for my mother. I miss her terribly, and I love her. (Bell-Scott et al., 1991, p. 161)

African motherhood has served as a site where African women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in African women's empowerment (Bernard, 1996). It has also provided a space for me to reflect on my truth as a daughter, and to empower myself and expose the dangers of not being able to tell my story from my perspective. These powerful experiences have set me on a path to finding my identity as an African woman. To grow as a woman, and not live my life searching for my father through other men, and to love myself the way I am, because I cannot love someone else if I don't like myself.

I cannot leave my life for other people because I am afraid of making the same mistakes, my mother made. I appreciate all the sacrifices that my mother has made but how can I go around knowing am an empty shell of a woman? I am pretending to be alive when I feel dead inside. I must break the cycle of trauma. I have always felt this in my spirit. I have lived with the fear of abandonment for so long that I feel like I need to make a hole in the bubble of grief I have been living in, so I can breathe a little better.

Because of these experiences, I have learned to appreciate, either good or bad, that the values I learned from my mother and othermothers as a child has helped me to critically examine myself, to empower myself to confront and break difficult situations I face on a day to day basis. Acknowledging the current that flows between African mothers and daughters is often turbulent, deepened and intensified by sexism and oppression, African mothers, especially those with strong ties in their communities, sometimes build high banks around their daughters to protect

their young daughters from dangers that lie ahead (Bell-Scott et al., 1991), especially while trying to provide for their families.

I intend to use my work to critically analyze and help African women navigate the turbulence in African mother-daughter relationship and other aspects of their lives, to be able to honestly “cut the cords” of paternal abandonment that has plagued families for generations. As African women, we sometimes mirror the terror of our childhood. Even when we think we have overcome our pain. It is genuinely a never-completed task due to our ability to lie to ourselves. The truth lies within the lies we tell ourselves to rationalize our torture, abuse or neglect.

I walk upon the sacrifices of my mother

I felt her pain in my spirit

I uphold the words of truth

The words are living in my belly

I speak the words to my sisters after me

And carry them farther away

From the woe behind me

As African women we need to stop focusing so much on what we do not want: I do not want to be like my mother; My father does not matter to me; I do not want to be weak. We never focus on what we want and how to heal ourselves from the pain we carry around with us. The real healing begins when we tell the obvious and radical truth, that we are “daddyless daughters.” Accepting this is the first step to healing. The second step is to be willing to give up the story of who Daddy is or who Mummy is not. Break it down into a simple sentence “Daddy’s gone” (Vanzant, 2013),” Mama has done her best.” It is time for me to reclaim self and it is time to continue my journey of healing and not repeat the same mistakes. It takes willpower and a deep

self-awareness to change the mentality of emotional dysfunction; therefore, therapy and familial support are so necessary for so many women in the African community. It pains me to see that many young women, who come from broken homes, do not have the financial and familial support to break through the mentality of emotional dysfunction and pain.

After owning the story, owning the pieces and parts of the story, we can take a good look at it. We need to be able to forgive ourselves for the negative things we told ourselves about ourselves because of Daddy not being there, for judging Mama without understanding her pain and feeding the turbulence that has plagued our relationship. Once we tell the fundamental truth, reduce the story to ten words or less and forgive self for the things we told self that were not true about self, what we must do is to re-claim self because we cannot value or esteem self if we do not know who self is. That self has got to be stable, reliable and bold. As a Black woman, I have been able to redefine who I am as a woman not as a little girl missing her daddy, but as a woman who is ready to re-create her life based on the part of my soul that I have claimed and how I defined self. As Black women, we must reclaim, redefine and re-create ourselves as adults and allow that little part we have lost grow (Vanzant, 2013).

Through my work, I am committed to learning as much as I can about self and how to move forward so that I can be an example for the women in my community. I have gone through the pain of being pushed aside by my father and being angry at my mother for being unwilling to move on with her life when confronted with the reality of her situation. I can boldly stand in front of my mirror and say that I have forgiven both my parents. I have accepted the grace that God has given me which has allowed me to overcome the situation with the determination not only to help myself but to prevent a future generation of women in my family and community from experiencing this ever again. I do this with the hope that I can finally be free from a

troubled relationship with my mother. I hope that I can teach my daughters things I learned from my mother and othermothers and I hope that young girls and women in my community will be able to appreciate the complexities of African mother-daughter relationships. I hope they embrace the diverse mothering traditions and values fostered by the women in their family and not surrender to a system designed to negate African women's experiences.

Mama

Mama, in this land full of strangers your face is all I remember.

Your eyes filled with tears as I move out the egress

My heart is chockfull of blues

Moving far away from home to a land unknown.

We've hurt each other in more ways than one

My agony became your pain

Your overwhelming love I own

On days it's arduous to stand You hold my feet to the ground

Memories of you calm my fears

Oh, Mama, I love you so

I never thought these words would come out of my mouth

I love you.

Appendix

Glossary of Words

Abimbola: Born in wealth

Ewere: Crowned in fortune

Olaseni: Fathers name

Onyebuchi: Mothers name

Iya ni wura: Mother is gold

a iṣura to kiyesi i: A treasure to behold

ó tàn bí oòrùn: She shines like the sun

Ni awon Dudu ju wakati ti aye wa: In the darkest hour of our lives

O ko wa lati nife: She taught us how to love

O si sure fun wa pelu re ogbon: She blessed us with her wisdom

O fi wa ni agbara ti idariji: She showed us the power of forgiveness

Yeye ni wura: Mother is gold

ó gbejade wa irora: she carries our pain

ó rù wa lailewu nipase egan iná: Anchoring us safely through the wildfire

Ki a le rin ni ona ti o ti pese sile fun wa: That we may walk the path she has prepared for us

Nne: Grandmother

Aluhwa Nne: Welcome home grandmother

gele: Headscarf

Ayo: A game played in a wooden box, containing twelve holes and forty eight ayo seeds.

Okuko: Chicken

Agate beads: Red stone beads made from gemstones (Jasper)

Iyùn: Red coral beads

Garri: Cassava flakes

Òkùnkùn: darkness

Imole: Light

Osun: A State in the Western part of Nigeria

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