Theses and Dissertations (All)

12-2017

"Of [White] Woman Born": How Whiteness, Motherhood, and the Fraught Mother-Daughter Relationship in 20th Century, U.S. Literature Contrasts Minority Texts

Charity L. Gibson

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd

 Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

"OF [WHITE] WOMAN BORN": HOW WHITENESS, MOTHERHOOD,

AND THE FRAUGHT MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN

20TH CENTURY, U.S. LITERATURE CONTRASTS MINORITY TEXTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Charity L. Gibson

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2017

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Charity L. Gibson

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____   _____

Veronica Watson, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Advisor

_____   _____

Mike Sell, Ph.D.
Professor of English

_____   _____

Tanya Heflin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

_____   _____

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: "Of [White] Woman Born": How Whiteness, Motherhood, and the Fraught Mother-Daughter
          Relationship in 20th Century, U.S. Literature Contrasts Minority Texts

Author: Charity L. Gibson

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Veronica Watson

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Mike Sell
                                          Dr. Tanya Heflin

This study examines how mother-daughter relationships in white culture differ from mother-daughter relationships in minority cultures, specifically Chicano, Asian American, and African American culture, due to white culture's lack of appropriate esteem for the role of mothering. Mother-daughter relationships in minority cultures tend to be much stronger due to a cultural reverence of motherhood, resulting in less mother-blame and mother-guilt.

Fictional and non-fictional representations of the mother-daughter relationship typically include culturally normative viewpoints regarding the mother-daughter relationship which suggest that white women and women of color are influenced by cultural ideologies of femininity. In recognizing these discrepancies, dominant culture can begin to recognize their own practices to be white specific rather than universal. This can perhaps lead white culture to learn from minority culture's cultivation of the mother-daughter bond.

DEDICATION

For my mom, who has always been on my side.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project never would have been possible without the prodding of the Holy Spirit, who led me to IUP, provided funding for my doctorate, gave me divine intervention to help me accomplish what I on my own could never do, and gave me the freedom in Christ Jesus to explore the seamless tie between the sacred and the secular, better recognizing how my Christian faith does indeed impact my scholarship. Thank you, Jesus, for proving true to me again and again that "[i]f any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" James 1:5.

I wish to thank my director, Veronica Watson, for the insight and direction she has given me throughout this project. Her careful eye and the many hours she has spent on my work has helped make my project one of which I am proud. Her encouragement has helped me to find greater confidence in myself and my ideas, and I have learned so much under her counsel. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Tanya Heflin and Dr. Mike Sell, for agreeing to be a part of this project. Their time and input has been valuable.

Finally, I would like to thank Ben, my husband. I could not have asked for a better spouse to go through this process with. From traveling with me and staying in Pennsylvania three summers in a row, to helping with the girls and house when I needed time to research and write, to being there to encourage me when I became frustrated or doubted myself, he has been my support. *Although you will probably never read this dissertation, it—and my entire doctoral program—has been impacted by you in countless ways. Thank you so much. I love you!*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

MOTHER-DAUGHTER ANGST AND MOTHER-BLAME IN WHITE CULTURE

It is impossible to frame any contemporary discussion of motherhood without

acknowledging Adrienne Rich, who is known for reviving contemporary attention to the feminist

focus on motherhood. In her 1977 seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience*

and Institution, Rich laments that mother-daughter relationships are not valued and cultivated,

"The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female

tragedy" (237). Mothers are blamed by both children and culture as well as blame themselves.

As Rich persuasively argues, "The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less

guilty of having failed their children" (223). She posits that mothers are not telling their own

stories and are being looked upon critically from both their daughters and the culture at large. As

Rich's work on motherhood is closely considered, however, despite her incorporation of many

previously overlooked issues regarding motherhood, her glaring omission of race becomes

apparent. Only in her updated preface written ten years later does Rich admit that she looked

specifically at white women's experiences and texts, "White feminists have not, it seems, found

it easy to express a feminist vision without tripping on the wires of that realm known as

'women's culture'… I treated such differences insubstantially, if at all…I was trying to scan the

territory using instruments then most familiar to me: my own experience, literature by white and

middle-class Anglo Saxon women…" (xxiv-xxv). I seek to build on the omission of race Rich

acknowledges and to reconsider motherhood and mother daughter relationships not only by

bringing the maternal experiences of women of color into conversation with those of white

women, but also by focusing on what is typically invisible in the scholarship on motherhood:

whiteness.

Women of color have actually been telling of their experiences as mothers and seeing motherhood as a far less problematic part of their subjectivity than white women. In her updated preface, Rich acknowledges, "I was led to generalize that 'the cathexis between mother and daughter' was endangered always and everywhere. A consideration of American Indian, African, and Afro-American myth and philosophy might have suggested other patterns" (xxv). Rich decides "not to revise into the body of the book as I originally wrote it …This book is the work of one woman who has continued to learn, reflect, act, and write," but, despite the disclaimer, *Of Woman Born* still tends to be rather universally applied to Western women of all races and cultures (xxxv).[1] In her annotated bibliography on mothers and motherhood, Penelope Dixon speaks of Rich's influence, dubbing her work "as one of the major feminist studies on mothering" (11). Andrea O'Reilly, feminist author and editor of countless works on motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship, has edited *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born.* This text uses Rich's work as a way to interpret women's experiences as mothers; however, most of the authors in the anthology do not consider race at all. One scholar who does, Dannabang Kuwabong, English professor specializing in literature by women of color, actually argues that minority women, and specifically Native American women,

---

[1]Although in this updated preface Rich acknowledges her oversight regarding race, this error is not entirely true of her overall mindset during that period of her life. In 1978, only two years after *Of Woman Born* was published, Rich published her essay "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia." Thus, during this period of her life she was certainly thinking about the intersection between gender and race. She mostly focuses on the dangers of pitting white and black women against one another. However, at one point, she acknowledges the error of not identifying differences within races, "I used to envy the 'colorblindness' which some liberal, enlightened, white people were supposed to possess…But I no longer believe that 'colorblindness' – even if it exists – is the opposite of racism; I think it is, in this world, a form of naiveté and moral stupidity. It implies that I would look at a black woman and see her as white, thus engaging in white solipsism to the utter erasure of her particular reality" (299). The irony of this quote is that colorblindness is the exact pitfall Rich falls into regarding *Of Woman Born*. She simply forgets that they are different than white culture. Specifically, she forgets that not all mothers follow patterns exhibited by white motherhood. It seems that although, overall, Rich is aware of important ways that feminism and race are irrevocable linked, within the narrow focus of motherhood, feminism takes forefront to race.

do not necessarily feel disempowered by experiences that women from dominant culture do, "I am by no means oblivious to the position of several feminist writers, including Rich, who see motherhood as sometimes disempowering to women…But I am also aware that often, anti-innatist feminist rhetoric has overdetermined the interpretations of motherhood, even when the cultures examined, or majority of women perceive motherhood differently" (94-95). Kuwabong is an example of a woman of color whose work embraces a different model than Rich's and highlights for me something that is consistently missing from the scholarship on motherhood: an examination of white culture and the frameworks of motherhood that make Rich's analysis necessary. This consistent omission of white self-reflexivity within maternal theory shows that there is still much important work to be done.

To conduct research on motherhood, as it has been influenced by white culture, is to draw heavily upon at least two primary theoretical fields: feminism[2] and critical whiteness studies. Both components are equally important to my study. Critical race theory and even critical race feminism have currently done very little with motherhood, and it is my hope that my study will help initiate additional conversations on not only the intersection of race with motherhood but also the influence of white ideology on theories and practices of motherhood. Feminism's history with the topic of motherhood is complicated. Feminist and literary psychoanalyst Marianne Hirsch, in her hugely influential book *The Mother/Daughter Plot* explains, "The separation between feminist discourse and maternal discourse can be attributed to feminism's complicated ambivalence about power, authority, and…anger …feminist theoretical writing in the U.S. is

---

[2] While I am adopting a feminist perspective, I am not adhering to all political stances the feminist movement as a whole tends to endorse, although there is great variety amongst specific beliefs of feminists. As Sarah Bessey says, "It's not necessary to subscribe to all the diverse—and contrary—opinions within feminism to call oneself a feminist" (13). Similarly, emphasizing the variety of opinions within feminism, Lois Tyson notes, "[J]ust as the practitioners of all critical theories do, feminist critics hold many different opinions on all of the issues their discipline examines" (83).

permeated with fears of maternal power and with anger at maternal powerlessness" (166-7).

Some of the anger Hirsch references manifested itself in Second Wave feminism, the period

beginning in the early 1960s and extending to the early 1980s, when feminists reacted against

Victorian sensibilities of the mother as an Angel in the House, irrevocably bound to the cult of

domesticity; they all but wrote off motherhood as an antiquated patriarchal system through

which women experience nothing but oppression. That perspective was so pervasive that

O'Reilly countered that "motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive, a

view held by some Second Wave feminists" (794). Similarly, Christina Baker says, "Despite

second wave's silence on the subject, motherhood and feminism have always been linked"

(204.)[3]

Third Wave feminism, beginning in the early 1990s, brought motherhood back into the

discussion as a potentially useful institution and/or practice with its emphasis on the element of

choice. There is no one right way to be a good mother. As one example of choice, a woman may

choose to work, stay home, or do some combination of the two over the course of her life.[4]

Robin Morgan, editor of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, which was an influential anthology during the

Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s, is one author who identifies shifts from Second to

Third Wave in reference to motherhood. In her autobiography, Morgan voices, "Since the

patriarchy commanded women to be mothers (the thesis), we had to rebel with our own polarity

and declare motherhood a reactionary cabal (antithesis). Today a new synthesis has emerged; the

concept of mother-right, affirmation of a woman's child-bearing and/or child-rearing when it is a

---

[3] Baker also says something similar in her work with Christina Baker Kline where they observe, "Yet, in this fundamental visioning of woman's role in society, many second-wave feminists saw little room for mothering" (xiv-xv).

[4] Although women can indeed choose to stay home, as will become apparent in chapter three, many would argue that there is still pressure from social expectations of good mothering to stay home, but now the decision is couched as a choice rather than an unquestioned practice, as it was in earlier time periods.

woman's *choice*" (8). This potentially positive view of women giving birth to and caring for children differs from some very staunch Second Wave feminists who believed that the answer for every mother was liberation from the home, which not only Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* but also Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* advocate.

Third Wave feminism's revival of motherhood is indebted to progressive, late Second Wave women who challenged the notion that academia should dismiss the experience and analysis of motherhood. Adrienne Rich led the way with *Of Woman Born*, but others such as Tillie Olsen in *Silences*, Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot*, and Alta in *Momma* [5]continued the momentum by claiming an academic self in addition to a mother identity and showing the challenges involved by acknowledging the anger, despair, and loneliness involved in mothering, rather than just focusing on the moments of pride, ecstasy, and intimacy. Such texts, however, have proven to be the exception, for as Hirsch claims, "A mother cannot articulate anger as a mother; to do so she must step out of a culturally circumscribed role which commands mothers to be caring and nurturing to others, even at the expense of themselves" (170). By and large, since motherhood has again become a well-publicized and studied topic, Third Wave feminism has latched onto less emotionally charged topics than maternal anger. In some ways, things have come full circle: motherhood is again valorized but surrounded by societal expectation, as it was in the Victorian era. Motherhood serves as a popular issue in the media, entertainment, and the academy, yet, the biggest change is that Third Wave feminism, in most cases, views motherhood as "chosen" rather than "assumed," which suggests that mothers have some agency since contemporary culture no longer demands women to be mothers. However, Third Wave also

---

[5] All of these texts are multi-genre in the sense that the writings are a mixture of confessional memoir, literature review (mostly Rich's and Olsen's), anthropology, and social commentary.

acknowledges that although women are not forced to be mothers, society still expects "good women" to make this choice.

Even accepting that motherhood today should simply be a choice rather than a role that women are coerced to take up, an additional feminist issue to be addressed concerns my framing of this topic around mothering as opposed to parenting. Connected to the various ways motherhood has been viewed by feminists is the argument that an emphasis on women as caretakers is harmful because it reifies the belief that women are the only suitable caretakers, which has been long used as an argument to continue the separate spheres ideology in which men interact with public life and women solely interact with the private life of the home and family. Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick explains women's tendency toward nurturance not as a biological reality but as a sociological cultivation, "Maternal thought does, I believe, exist for all women in a radically different way than for men. It is because we are daughters, nurtured and trained by women, that we early receive maternal love with special attention to its implication for our bodies, our passions, our ambitions" (107). Thus, by viewing women as caregivers, specifically in the form of mothers, I am not arguing that only women have the capacity to provide care, but rather I am agreeing with Ruddick that women have been specifically reared to see themselves and other women as caregivers. An examination of motherhood rather than one of parenthood is in order because most men have been nurtured much differently regarding their familial responsibilities. Therefore, even if mothers and fathers perform the same role, the ideologies and social mores for each are different. Ruddick also points out that replacing the concept of *mothering* with *parenting* would dishonor the "historical and cultural assignment of this work to women" (40-1). Simply shifting our terminology from *mothering* to *parenting*

ignores the vast amount of women who have been oppressed by patriarchal expectations of women as primary caregivers.[6]

As I previously established, the focus on mothering and the reinstatement of motherhood as a popular topic has certainly overlooked race. While some of this may be true for Western culture in general, it is especially so for American culture. I will be analyzing U.S. mainstream culture, which contains people of both dominant and minority status. I will be theorizing middle class, aspirational whiteness. I recognize that those whites who are disabled, poor, and queer exist outside this dominant culture. While issues regarding motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship can still exist in these sub-groups of white culture, I am looking at dominant white culture because, as the middle class has historically comprised the largest demographic in the U.S., it receives the most attention and has the largest impact. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, "'Middle-income' Americans are defined as adults whose annual household income is two-thirds to double the national median" (qtd. in "The American Middle Class" 1). While the Pew Research Center states that the middle class is not as large as it used to be,[7] with recent growth for both the poor and rich, it has had great sway, especially the past four decades, and therefore, I find to be the most distinguishable and influential group within white culture.

Academic Garry R. Weaver states, "The U.S. is a culturally diverse society. However,

---

[6] Some may even ask why the word *parenting* should be used as opposed to *caregiving,* which not only is non-gendered but also does not imply that the care must be given by a biological parent or guardian because what is important is simply that care is given rather than focusing on who specifically is giving the care, which has been used as an argument for the necessity of one parent staying home with the children. My reason for refuting the term *caregiving* is the same as my reason for refuting the term *parenting*: It denies the historical reality that the role of mother has had, in which the term and role have been gendered and largely connected with familial connection or guardianship.

[7] "[T]he American middle class is now matched in number by those in the economic tiers above and below it. In early 2015, 120.8 million adults were in middle-income households, compared with 121.3 million in lower- and upper-income households combined, a demographic shift that could signal a tipping point, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of government data" ("The American Middle Class" 1).

there is also a dominant culture…A more historically accurate metaphor [than that of the melting

pot] is that the U.S. has had a cultural "cookie-cutter" with a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant,

male mold or shape" (3). However, not all minority cultures have assimilated to the shape of

dominant ideologies, especially concerning mothering, but because most white people perceive

motherhood as a unifying experience for all mothers, important differences which are racially

constructed are missed. For about the last twenty-five years, feminism has been chided for its

Euro-centric, bourgeoisie focus. Critical race feminist scholar Elizabeth V Spelman succinctly

explains the issue, "[T]he real problem has been how feminist theory has confused the condition

of one group of women with the condition of all…A measure of the depth of white middle-class

privilege is that the apparently straightforward and logical points and axioms at the heart of

much of feminist theory guarantee the direction of its attention to the concerns of white middle-

class women" (4). Much work has been done to highlight the intersectionality of race and

gender, mostly conducted by women of color; only recently has white feminism begun to

understand the pitfalls of traditional feminism. However, in terms of maternal theory, feminism

continues to have many blinders. To be fair, there are some specific topics related to motherhood

in which feminism mostly acknowledges racial implications.

    White feminists often adequately address race when analyzing women of color's fertility

and childbirth, as well as obvious (to an aware observer) issues of racial discrimination such as

educational and economic disadvantages,[8] but race is less often discussed in overarching theories

---

[8] The issue of race is important in respect to Third Wave's insistence that motherhood be a choice because poor women, who tend to be women of color, lack reliable birth control. Independent historian, curator, and lecturer Rickie Solinger expounds, "Even though black and white women report wanting the same number of children, black women are three times as likely as white women to have an unintended pregnancy. Hispanic women are about twice as likely as white women to become accidentally pregnant" (75-6). Thus, white women have more choice in deciding to become pregnant. Furthermore, whether a woman of color's pregnancy is expected or unexpected, her children are more likely to be viewed by society at large as a potential burden. Political activist, scholar, and author Angela Davis insists, "For many women of color, choosing to become a mother challenges institutional policies that encourage white, middle-class women to reproduce, and discourage and even penalize low-income racial ethnic

of motherhood. The central problem is that the theories are presented as universal rather than what they truly are: reflective of white cultural norms. This is true for theories on motherhood in general as well as on the mother-daughter relationship specifically, which will be the locus for much of my study. While the idea of the mother-daughter relationship relating not only to patriarchy but also race is something that some theorists are beginning to address, most have not developed theories as to *why* the white mother-daughter relationship is so fundamentally different from the mother- daughter relationship of women of color. For so long in academia, the feminist emphasis has simply been on the need for the mother-daughter relationship to be explored at all that now the next step appears to be giving careful attention to ways race affects mothering and the representation of the bonds between mothers and daughters.

Critical whiteness studies is important for my study of motherhood. Critical whiteness theory is inter-disciplinary and analyzes how whiteness is constructed (individually as well as socially) and the related moral repercussions. It not only calls attention to blatant and subtle racism but it also calls attention to the nuances of internalized and unquestioned, perhaps even unconscious, acceptance of white superiority. Although some point to W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin as founding figures, which would tie the theory all the way back to the Harlem Renaissance of the late 1920s to mid-1930s, a broader definition suggests that critical whiteness theory is an offset of critical race theory, which is a social science theoretical framework that came about in the late 1980s, according to philosopher and activist Lewis R. Gordon. In her 1999 work *Displacing Whiteness,* critical whiteness scholar Ruth Frankenberg offers insight into the emergence of this area of study: "For the most part, critical work on whiteness has emerged in

women from doing so" (qtd. in Collins 318). Therefore, for women of color, choosing to have a baby is not only a personal choice but also a political statement in opposition to messages from the dominant culture.

the context of, and very frequently in direct response to, critique of racism and the racial order focused on positions of subordination, whether the latter is undertaken by people of color (as has most often been the case) or by white people" (2). Because many do not equate the institution of motherhood with systems of subordination that have been manipulated by patriarchal society and white mores, motherhood may have been bypassed as a fruitful topic for a theoretical engagement with critical whiteness studies. However, as Frankenberg addresses, critical whiteness theory is involved in "radically revising and extending…feminist historiography" (2). Thus, critical whiteness study should be an approach utilized to examine motherhood and mother-daughter relationships.

Some may question how bringing a critical whiteness lens to analyze motherhood is different from simply employing multicultural feminism, which is a nuanced feminism that developed in the mid-1980s. In her textbook covering gradations of feminist thought, Rosemary Tong spends a chapter covering "Multicultural, Global, and Postcolonial Feminism." Regarding multicultural feminism's development, Tong explains that American feminists were "[r]epentant about mainstream feminism's relative neglect of women's differences and its failure to push marginalized women's concerns to the forefront of its agenda…Thus was born multicultural feminism, a variety of feminist thought that was rapidly linked to so-called women-of-color feminism in the United States (202). Critical whiteness theory can fit within many of the parameters of multicultural feminism; however, it holds some ideological differences from multicultural feminists. Tong explains that eventually multicultural feminists began to worry that focusing on color was actually a form of oppression, which is not an opinion held by critical whiteness theorists, who believe that focusing on color is necessary to understand the full spectrum of experiences by which whiteness is privileged and color is discriminated against.

They [multicultural feminists] worried that women of noncolor (i.e., women who look white) were the point of reference for women of color (i.e., women who look black, yellow, or red phenotypically). In other words, the theorists feared that, in using the term "women of color" to refer to themselves, women who were African American, Latin American/Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American might "other" themselves and "self" white women. (Tong 208)

This normalization of whiteness goes back to the issue that whiteness is always assumed to be the standard; multicultural feminists sometimes question the usefulness of terms such as 'white women' and 'women of color' because women of color are non-white, i.e. they stand out as existing outside the norm. Critical whiteness studies, in contrast to some multicultural feminists, advocates for the necessity of identifying race. But even more, it argues for the necessity of interrogating whiteness as a racial construct as a way of dislodging its status as the center and the norm. In their anthology *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain the need for comparisons: "Race seems to be, to a large extent, relational. Whiteness, acknowledged or not, has been a norm against which other races are judged. One cannot get clear about whiteness without also gaining a sense of what it means to be nonwhite—and vice versa" (1). Because whiteness has indeed served as a contrast to other races, motherhood and the mother-daughter relationships reveals such divergences. In this project, I will be analyzing how ideologies of whiteness are at work within mainstream beliefs about motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship and how this impacts literature as well as how women of color offer different portrayals of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in both theory and literature.

There is much research available on the ways in which minority cultures vary from white culture. Specifically, there is a fair amount of research focusing on ways in which women of color mother differently than white women.[9] However, most of the literary analysis centers on texts by women of color and highlights ways in which the mothering perceptions and techniques differ from those of whites. In contrast, due to the invisibility of whiteness, in the sense that whites are seldom reflective about their own race and the implications of being white, there is very little scholarship in which ideologies of motherhood in white literature are analyzed in order to deconstruct the strategies and beliefs at work, behaviors and parenting styles that are often perceived as being universal rather than a specifically white ideology. In her piece "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview," women, gender, and ethnic studies scholar Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes,

> What may be needed to emphasize the social base of mothering is attending to the variation rather than searching for the universal, and to shift what has been on the margins to the center. Women scholars of color have mounted the most serious challenges to universalistic theory. They have documented the different historical experiences of communities of color, and therefore the differing cultural contexts and material conditions under which mothering has been carried out. Because of varying historical experiences, these communities have constructed mothering in ways that diverge from the dominant model. (5)

Attending to the variation is important and searching for the universal can indeed be problematic. It lends itself to generalizations and sweeping statements. Interacting with white literature and

---

[9] African American feminists have produced the most scholarship identifying elements that make black mothers and motherhood distinct (see Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, etc.) from white culture. This may be due to Black Feminism or the fact that African Americans make up the largest minority in the United States and have resided in the U.S. the longest.

then contrasting it to literature by women of color can effectively identify the flaws in viewing white ideology as universal, which is something of which the white community needs to become aware so that change amongst mothers and daughters can occur.

As an example of whiteness universalized in theory, Rich claims that mother-daughter relationships are highly negatively charged and strained, "This cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story" (225).This is an instance of a white maternal theory being universally applied, as Rich's avoidance of any mention of race suggests that this mother-daughter rupture occurs regardless of the mother and daughter's cultural background. Yet, some scholars are beginning to recognize that the concept of unavoidable conflict inherent within mother-daughter relationships simply does not play out in minority cultures and literature as it does in white literature and culture. Citing African American and Chicana literature as exceptions to white culture's expectation of mother-daughter angst, Rita Bode argues that the belief that the mother-daughter relationship is "one constructed in conflict," may be "a phenomenon limited to white, bourgeois society" (173, 289). Theorists such as Bode are certainly on the right track; yet, what has currently been missing following such statements is a careful investigation to surmise *why* minority literature does not follow the same trajectory. Truly, it is white culture's devaluation and misunderstanding of motherhood which has resulted in a severed mother-daughter relationship; contrastingly, it is the value minority cultures place on motherhood and the agency afforded within it which results in positive mother-daughter relationships. It is necessary to pair texts about motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship from white and minority culture in order to note not only that different sorts of relationships are represented but also to locate the catalyst for each kind of relationship within each culture's maternal ideologies.

While O'Reilly's work has been hugely influential to maternal theorists and has added much to my own understanding of the topic, she is an example of a theorist who, at times, falls into the trap of white universalism. O'Reilly argues that today, largely due to the awareness Rich raised, mother-daughter stories are being reclaimed. She asserts that contemporary women authors "use textual spaces to accept, embrace, negotiate, reconcile, resist, and challenge traditional concepts of mothering and maternal roles and…offer alternative practices and visions of mothers in the present and future" (1). However, what O'Reilly does not address is that with the postmodern focus on multiculturalism, many of the texts receiving attention are by women of color. O'Reilly seems to, overall, assert that women in general are beginning to portray motherhood more positively rather than acknowledging that women from particular ethnic backgrounds tend to portray motherhood differently. There are times in which O'Reilly gives credence to issues of race. For example, in the work she edited with Sharon Abbey, *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation,* they both state, in reference to the mother-daughter relationship in literature and culture that "the connection-empowerment-transformation trajectory is mapped along various paths to include differences of race, ethnicity…and nationality" (3). However, even their title suggests that they are highlighting general similarities as opposed to differences, and ultimately they claim that although mother-daughter relationships may develop differently due to specificities of race, the end result for all is positive.

I argue in this dissertation that, overall, the white mother-daughter relationship is not portrayed in either the media or fiction in empowering ways. O'Reilly and Abbey claim that mother-daughter empowerment is a universal phenomenon in contemporary times. They cite a mother-daughter conference that took place in 1997 and was "attended by more than 159

speakers from around the world" as proof of the kind of revolution that is happening (1).

However, one must be careful not to identify progress in certain cultures as proof for all women.

The specific backgrounds and ethnicities should be carefully examined to see how many Western

women were represented, how many women of color, etc. I am more interested in looking at

differences between cultural and racial variations than I am in looking at similarities because

American culture has already made a myriad of blanket statements about motherhood which

have been assumed to suggest similarities between women of all races. However, one must even

be careful in characterizing Western mores of motherhood as a whole, for as Pamela

Druckerman shows in her successful cultural comparison *Bringing Up Bébé: One American*

Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting (now with Bébé Day by Day: 100 Keys to

French Parenting), the United States and France have very different ideas and expectations

regarding parenting and, specifically, motherhood, regardless of the fact that both are

industrialized Western countries with a white majority. Thus, when I use the term Western

culture, I predominantly mean North American Western culture. However, what Druckerman

terms "American-style parenting" she later clarifies as "a white, middle-upper class mother,"

showing that even though there are different ideologies amongst Westernized countries in

reference to motherhood, overall, a white ideology still prevails (140).

Hirsch is an example of a theorist who points out a difference between white culture and

black culture in reference to maternal practices. She highlights that "[u]nlike so many

contemporary white feminists writers who define their artistic identity as separate from or in

opposition to their mothers," the African American mother's voice and experience has been

celebrated: "[O]ne tradition among the various feminisms that have developed in the last twenty

years does feature the mother prominently and in complex and multiple ways –the tradition of

15

black American women writers of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s" (176). Hirsch goes on to call this a "public celebration of maternal presence and influence" through "their portrayals of strong and powerful mothers" (177). Black women are asserting themselves against patriarchy in celebrating and proclaiming the strength of women. Hirsch briefly speculates that because black women are more distanced from "cultural and literary hegemony" they are more willing to distance themselves from male approval, but she makes no attempt to explain why black women have not fallen into the same trap as white women in distancing themselves from their mothers (Hirsch 16). She never explains *why* their experiences and representations of motherhood are significant or *how* race heavily impacts, focusing instead on how the progression of time has brought about the change from mothers moving from objects to subjects. She points to models, such as the traditional story of Oedipus Rex as an example of a marginalized mother (Jocasta) and points to texts such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* showing how contemporary society is beginning to resist the silencing of mothers. Yet, the fact that she jumps from a European tradition to an African American one is never addressed as being even noteworthy, although I would argue it makes all the difference.

Furthermore, the fact that Hirsch's text only shows examples of marginalized mothers in white texts and examples of empowered mothers in texts by women of color seems to be lost on most feminists. Reviewer Gayle Greene in *The Women's Review of Books* voices some understanding of Hirsch's oversights in asking, "What exactly is it about the familial and social backgrounds of Afro-American women writers that enables them to speak the mother plot differently?... I would like to know more about motherhood as ideology, as a social construction which…takes different forms according to class and race, though dominant myths about it remain suspiciously the same…" (8-9). In response to Green's questioning of how race impacts

motherhood, I will analyze nuanced differences between white culture and cultures of color

which have allowed mothers of color to perceive themselves and be perceived by others in their

culture as subjects rather than objects.

White culture differs from minority culture in its dichotomous view of motherhood, its

propelling of mother-blame,[10] and its lack of mother support networks, which culminate in

disempowered mothers and fraught mother-daughter relationships. However, despite white

motherhood's distinctiveness when compared to motherhood via women of color, currently,

there are no existing anthologies or studies which succinctly focus on white mothering and the

uniqueness of the white mother-daughter relationship. I find my project necessary because most

scholars who reference Hirsch's work appear to accept her theory as having overarching

application, rather than showing the differences that exist between the ways various racial groups

view and practice motherhood. This universalization of motherhood probably occurs because

they are in search of sister solidarity in which race does not matter. Yet, race matters greatly not

because it suggests any sort of innate difference but because society is constructed according to

racial hierarchy, and whites and people of color have developed their identities accordingly.

As another example of a theorist who deals only superficially with race's impact on

motherhood, feminist academic Dorothy Dinnerstein briefly mentions race in her posited theory

on maternity but then goes on to say that race really has no bearing on the outcome. In her work

---

[10] No specific person has been credited with first using the term mother-blame/blaming, which is the socially
sanctioned belief that an individual's problems can be tied back to his or her mother and her mistreatment of him/her
(whether intentional or unintentional.) However, the concept is a long-used one. Jonathan M. Metzl MD, PhD,
reports that *"the histories of medicine and psychiatry are rife with examples of scientific theories that blamed
mothers for a host of ills in their children."* Paula Caplan has largely research the term and concept in her work
Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship, which came out in 1990 and was revised in
2000. Caplan, along with graduate student, analyzed 125 articles in 1970, '76, and '82. She reports on their findings,
"[M]others were blamed for seventy-two different kinds of problems in their offspring, ranging from bed wetting to
schizophrenia, from inability to deal with color blindness to aggressive behavior, from learning problems to
'homicidal transsexualism'" (45).

The Mermaid and the Minotaur, Dinnerstein focuses on white, nuclear middle class families in contemporary America; yet, she maintains: "Its central points are meant, however, to be usefully translatable to any human situation…" (40). While it is positive to point out possibilities of similarities in experience between mothers of various backgrounds, it is just as important to acknowledge the differences within that experience. Dinnerstein's argument that a framework that works in white culture will translate to any other culture because humanity is shared still begins from a white reference point. Spelman addresses the problem of attempting solidarity between cultures from the white normativity perspective,

> If, like Stampp,[11] I believe that the woman in every woman is a woman just like me, and if I also assume that there is no difference between being white and being a woman, then seeing another woman "as a woman" will involve seeing her as fundamentally like the woman I am. In other words, the womanness underneath the Black woman's skin is a white woman's, and deep down inside the Latino woman is an Anglo woman waiting to burst through a cultural shroud." (13)

Although Spelman is dealing with feminism in general, her comments relate well to why it is essential to explore motherhood not only from a perspective that acknowledges race but also one that does not assume that the experiences of motherhood for a white woman can easily be applied to a woman of color, believing her to be essentially synonymous with the white woman.

In asking why theorists often tend to normalize whiteness, specifically in regard to motherhood, it is impossible not to consider contemporary culture and the media's influence. Despite America's supposed pride at being the 'melting pot' or the currently more politically correct term, the 'salad bowl,' white culture's perspective has permeated American life and

---

[11] Kenneth Stampp is a historian who made the unfortunate claim "that innately Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing else" (qtd in Spelman 12).

Western culture, and this continues to be true in reference to all things maternal. Feminist columnist and cultural critic Susan J. Douglas and author and philosopher Meredith W. Michaels' book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* focuses on American culture's unrealistic expectations of motherhood. However, when they break down portrayals and representations of women in pop culture, they center, almost exclusively, on white mothers. Ranging from sitcoms and film, to front page news stories, to professional advice on parenting, white people both gaze and are gazed upon. The "new momism," as Douglas and Michaels call it, both subtly and blatantly reinforces expectations of how mothers should act. Yet, the only time the subject is a woman of color is when the media is portraying a failed mother (20). They point out that Western culture's portrayal of and adherence to the new momism "serves to divide us by age and race and 'lifestyle choices'" and that "the white, upper-middle-class, married-with-children nuclear family remains as dominant as a Humvee" (22). However, while Douglas and Michaels appear to view a division between races as negative, they fail to acknowledge that the new momism is a white mother issue. Ironically, their desire for unity amongst mothers of all colors creates a division in which mothers of color are assumed to function as white mothers because whiteness is never addressed as inherent within dominant culture. This is detrimental because if culturally enforced social mores are at the root of undervalued motherhood and dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships, the solution lies within learning from the ways that minority cultures, who overall have much more positive portrayals, resist such scripts.

I differ from Douglas and Michaels in their claim that the new momism separates women, including those of different races, in ways in which they either are or can be conscious. They claim that the new momism "suggested that mothers could never unite across divides" such

as "class and race" (235).[12] However, I am arguing not so much that white women are pitted against women of color in the ways that they mother as I am arguing that mainstream white society does not even realize that people of color are overlooked when motherhood is examined. Most whites do not even realize that there is a racial divide that influences how motherhood is perceived and enacted. It is due to this lack of awareness that white texts about motherhood need to be contrasted with minority texts about motherhood. Juxtaposing them reveals significantly different perceptions and representations of mothers and their relationships with their daughters.

Cultural critic and feminist E. Ann Kaplan's work *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* is another work which ties standard beliefs about mothers back to the propaganda of the media. Kaplan analyzes depictions of mothers in Western culture from 1830 to 1960 and shows the portrayal to be mostly negative. Although I am analyzing contemporary culture, Kaplan's historical retracing is helpful in order to see white culture's influencers over almost 200 years. Kaplan clarifies her focus to be North American culture, displaying that she also realizes that Western culture as a whole is not necessarily indicative of American culture. Furthermore, Kaplan acknowledges that her "study is, then, limited to tracing paradigms in white, North American, middle-class culture" (9). While she could have certainly expanded her focus, since she is studying pop culture, the most prominent portrayals in dominant culture are certainly white focused; thus, her lens is unsurprising. Kaplan acknowledges,

---

[12] There is an argument that the mommy wars do not exist for women of color. These so called wars, which some argue are simply media-induced, pit working mothers against stay-at-home mothers, but women of color typically work, historically and currently. As an example regarding African American women specifically, Deeshaw Philyaw writes, "That Black mothers were not among the combatants on the fake battlefield of the mommy wars is not coincidental. This simply wasn't our fight. (n.p.).

Understanding this prevailing or 'dominant' discourse is crucial even for groups that the dominant discourse marginalizes (e.g. Black, Jewish, Hispanic, and other American ethnic groups…) A study could be made of mother images in the sub-culture of each of these groups (and hopefully this book will inspire such studies if they are not already underway), but such a study could benefit from knowledge of how the dominant paradigm, oppressive for the minority group, came into being, how its very presence constructs (as part of its ideology) other groups as 'marginalized.' (9)

In many ways, my study follows well with Kaplan's call because it does indeed examine how the dominant white group's ideology of motherhood is different than people of color's ideologies.

Due to the specific culture of white patriarchy, white motherhood has and continues to be fundamentally different than motherhood for women of color within the United States. Of course, there are always deviations to patterns, and the key to avoiding essentialism is to allow for exceptions within the rule, or perhaps never allocating a hard rule. However, I will seek to show through historical patterns as well as close literary analysis that although individual white women may 'break with the trend,' overall, there is a prevailing experience of cultural conditioning surrounding motherhood. While many of the cultural differences will prove to have negatively affected white women, I certainly do not seek to posit white women as victims contrasted with women of color. White women are both privileged and complicit in the oppression of others; however, they have simultaneously been subjected to a specific set of expectations that have had huge ramifications on portrayals and perceptions of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship within white culture.

Since overall, white women have received so many benefits while women of color have and continue to suffer, one may ask why white mothers and the white mother-daughter relationship should be afforded this level of attention, especially if it potentially produces an image of white women being subjected to a type of victimization specific to the Caucasian female experience. Feminist, scholar, and lawyer Catharine A. Mackinnon argues that just because white women have been less subjugated than women of color does not mean that their oppression should be discounted. She argues, "Beneath the trivialization of the white woman's subordination implicit in the dismissive sneer 'straight white economically privileged women'…lies the notion that there is no such thing as discrimination on the basis of sex" (301). While Mackinnon argues that white women's oppression is only tied to their gender, I will be showing that being a part of white culture actually places white mothers within certain ideological confines that are both sexually and racially defined. Even if one disagrees that white ideologies can oppress white mothers, one may agree with psychologist Paula Caplan who argues that mother myths should be addressed and refuted because they ultimately affect all women (even if, according to my argument, the myths that are often presented as universal are actually specific to white women). Caplan explains that "until we recognize the need for what we might call the 'Norma Rae-ing of mother's struggles,' the need to reveal mothers' oppression and its systemic nature, few women of any ethnic or racialized group…will be free. Why? Because we all had mothers, and so we're connected with what is done to, what is said about mothers" (240).

It is also important to clarify where universalized myths of motherhood apply most specifically, or perhaps only, to white women because it often reveals the agency of women of color and the ways that they have resisted turning mothers and daughters against one another.

Such multicultural differentiations can serve as a positive model for how dominant culture can and should frame the mother-daughter relationship. As a white woman myself, I find it important to participate in the discussion of critical whiteness studies because the practice has the potential to destabilize dominant, often oppressive ideologies and actions. In *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and Ethical Action in Literature,* Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth argue that due to the "socially constructed invisibility of whiteness…white people, including women, have remained safe from self-confrontation" (x). They continue that white women engaging in careful thinking about whiteness may be well situated to help promote change, "[W]hite women—a group subordinated by gender yet privileged by race—offers a provocative vantage point on race because, presumably, this group's experience can lead its members to systematic change" (x). Though Najmi and Srikanth's anthology does not analyze motherhood, I believe that in highlighting racial specificities in motherhood, society can come to better understand ways in which white norms and especially white feminism has not attended to its unconscious limitations in the way they interpret and act out maternal ideologies and mother-daughter relationships.

In the following chapters, I will analyze elements of white culture that impact mothering and the mother-daughter relationship and then contrast these mores and ideologies with that of an ethnic culture. I use anthropology and sociology to draw evidence of patterns and then utilize literature to illustrate the pattern at work. I focus on the genre of the novel for a variety of reasons. The novel is an easily accessible format for the masses in which they are unaware that indoctrination is taking place. Readers typical read novels simply for entertainment, not expecting an ideological underpinning due to the nonintrusive nature of a story line.[13] Through

---

[13] Film functions similarly to the novel in this regard.

my multidisciplinary approach, I will demonstrate that mother-daughter angst (unresolved conflict, mother-blame/mother-guilt, and a strained relationship) is more a product of white culture than a mother-daughter phenomena in general. I will argue that, due to the way they have been influenced by dominant culture, white authors, even as they attempt to critique culture and patriarchy, continue to reinforce white ideologies in their fiction with negative messages regarding mothers and motherhood. I will also suggest that the fiction of women of color typically avoids such pitfalls due to different cultural expectations regarding motherhood.

Although my project brings to light some important realities, it also has limitations. I focus on the stories that are visible through the media and popular culture regarding dominant white culture; however, there are other stories being told in other sub-groups within white culture. As I am most interested in exploring the critical grist between women of color and white women, I largely address white culture as a unified entity rather than a nuanced conglomeration. However, another study could explore how non-dominant groups within white culture resist some of the pitfalls I will identify within dominant culture. Also, different genres besides the novel may complicate or change the messages I interpolate. These limitations do not invalidate my argument, as I clarify that my focus is only mainstream white culture as illustrated via the novel, but they do present a more unified version of white culture than some may perceive. However, because dominant white culture is the largest group by far within white culture and therefore has the most influence, when doing a cultural comparison, it is most accurate to examine what is most common within a cultural group rather than emphasizing the outliers.

Another limitation of my project is the potential of romanticizing ethnic cultures. As I seek to show ways that ethnic cultures have avoided some of the errors of white culture which have led to mother blame and a ruptured mother-daughter relationship, I emphasize only positive

24

aspects of minority cultures, which may seem to some as too idealistic of a portrayal. In actuality, I do acknowledge that all cultural groups suffer from their own shortcomings. However, I have not found ethnic cultures' weaknesses to have largely impacted portrayals of motherhood or to have severed the mother-daughter bond. Thus, due to the cultural comparison in which I am engaged, I only speculate on practices tied to my focus. Shortcomings related to patriarchy and other types of errors may exist in the ethnic cultures I examine, but I do not dwell on these as it is beyond the scope of my purpose.

To briefly highlight my emphases, in chapter two, I explore white culture's dualistic perception of the "good" or "bad" mother, which contrasts with Chicana culture's portrayal of a multifaceted mother, complete with positive and negative qualities, as opposed to a trope. I analyze these aspects through an examination of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.* In chapter three, I emphasize the negative impacts on white culture's expectation of the mother as the primary caregiver, which also relates to the historical cult of true womanhood (also known as the cult of domesticity), both of which are located within nuances of material feminism. I contrast Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* and the negative portrayal of the mother (and various foster mothers) being associated with her role as a working mother with Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* in which the working Asian American mother neither experiences guilt nor is viewed negatively by her daughter for not being a stay-at-home mother. Then, in chapter four, I explore the issue of successful and failed mother support networks to show that white culture does not value mother and familial work in the same way that minority cultures do. I contrast Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and its ultimately unsuccessful mother support networks with Toni Morrison's sustaining African American othermother relationships in *Beloved*. Finally, in

chapter five, I conclude by moving from the genre of fiction to non-fiction in order to show that the same mother ambivalence exists for white women even when they tell their own story as opposed to creating a fictional one. I examine the currently popular genre of motherhood memoir to show that today white women continue trends which are also apparent in fiction regarding adherence to myths of motherhood that women of color resist.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DICHOTOMY OF THE GOOD AND BAD MOTHER

Due to the patriarchal structure of many cultures and societies, throughout history,

women have been perceived as being potential sites for either good or evil, an ideal or a failure.

Regardless of the actualities of flesh and blood women and their lives, myths about them exist.

Feminists Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess describe "Woman" as "a symbolic

construct conflating gender, sex, and sexuality, and comprised of allegory, ideology, metaphor,

fantasy…and men's psychological projections" (194). In their classic text *Madwoman in the

Attic,* feminist literary and theory critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar address the dichotomy

of women expected to be angelic or monstrous.[14] In Western culture, while Diana and Athena

serve as powerful and moral goddesses, the primordial Furies and Medusa counterbalance as

gruesome representations of femininity at its worst. In contemporary U.S. culture, while pagan

myths hold less sway, many religious representations of the Virgin Mary, the chaste mother of

Christ, and Eve, the instigator of original sin, give credence to the possibility—and dichotomy—

of light and darkness that exists within women.[15]

While many cultures continue to proliferate problematic representations of women,

depictions and viewpoints of mothers are less aligned. U.S. contemporary white culture is one

---

[14] Gilbert and Gubar's central claim in *Madwoman* is that society dictates "that if they [women] do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (53). The available options of a passive figure, residing solely within the domestic sphere and sacrificing all agency to her family's wishes, or a monstrous woman who acts contrary to patriarchal social conventions and is thus barred from society, often embodying a femme fatale, are binaries that Gilbert and Gubar address, claiming that male authors portray female characters as one or the other, either the angel or the monster. Although Gilbert and Gubar focus specifically on British white women in the 19th century, I would argue that their thesis continues to have bearing in analyzing portrayals of women in the 20th and 21st century. Gilbert and Gubar state that oppression is something "[e]verywoman (sic) in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome" (339). Such subjugation certainly extends to literature both before and after the 1800s. Gilbert and Gubar also say that commonality of experience "links these nineteenth-century writers with…twentieth-century descendants" (78). In advocating a timeless quality about *Madwoman*, Marlene Tromp states that "it also challenged readers to see themselves as sisters of these nineteenth century women, to identify with them in consciousness-raising and with one another" (42).

[15] I am not arguing that this is true of the Biblical Mary and Eve but that these are common perceptions.

that continues to be influenced by dichotomous perceptions of women which have carried over into "good mother" and "bad mother" motifs. In this chapter, I will analyze why white culture dichotomizes mothers and how it impacts the mother-daughter relationship and will illustrate this at work in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. I will contrast this polarization of motherhood with Latino culture's embracement of a multifaceted mother, which can be seen through Laura Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a text that presents respect for the mothering role and hope for the mother-daughter bond.

Feminist philosopher and psychologist Sarah LaChance Adams acknowledges that mothers are perceived and portrayed dichotomously, saying, "The romanticization of maternity has divided mothers into the categories of either naturally good or pathologically bad" (12). While much scholarship exists identifying the dualistic perceptions of motherhood,[16] little work from a critical whiteness perspective has analyzed the motivating force for *why* such polarized images of motherhood exist in white culture.

In *Good Mother, Bad Mother,* author and former maternity nurse Gina Ford posits that rather than women asking, "Am I a good mother? Or a bad mother?" they should simply be able to ask, "Or am I just myself, flawed but trying to do the best I can?" (4.) Ford, like most, does not consider how race might affect the way mothers perceive themselves. However, due to white culture's adherence to the dichotomy of motherhood, portrayals of white women in the news and media tend to adhere to either the good or bad mother as opposed to embodying a complex

---

[16] See the following titles: *Good Mums, Bad Mums* by Oluwakemi Ola-Ojo, *The Good Mother Myth: Redefining Motherhood to Fit Reality*, edited by Avital Norman Nathman, *So Glad They Told Me: Women Get Real About Motherhood,* edited by Stephanie Sprenger, *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace* by Ayelet Waldman, and *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage,* edited by Cathi Hanauer

mother who is both good and probably somewhat bad at times. Many mothers, especially white

mothers, often question whether they are "good moms" or "bad moms," as if these were the only

two options available for evaluating their mothering practices. The media has undoubtedly

impacted mothers' self-perceptions. As a current example, PalmStar Media's screen play of *Bad*

Moms, which came out in summer 2016, simultaneously highlights the problem of unrealistic

expectations of motherhood while dichotomizing the options of being a "good" or "bad" mother.

The three main characters all deviate from being "good" moms by refusing to adhere to protocols

of the local PTA. The mothers represent a range of mothering experiences, as one is a married,

stay-at-home mother of four; one is a separated, part-time working mother of two; and the other

is a divorced, promiscuous mother of one. However, while the movie lampoons idealistic

impression of mothers as June Cleaver types (the women going so far as to vandalize a card

board cut-out of a smiling, perfectly domesticated woman in the grocery store), it simultaneously

reifies the motif of a good mother at the end of the film in which all women basically embody

variations of good motherhood, with all three mothers happily dropping their children off at

school before embarking on a relaxing day out with one another. In her review "'Bad Moms' is

What Happens When Men Attempt to Make a Feminist Movie," Lisa Batkin, editorial assistant

at the *New York Review of Books*, insightfully remarks of the portrayal of the mothers in the film,

"Transgression of the feminine norm (in the tame forms of getting drunk and eating pizza) is

treated as a rite of passage, something that needs to be purged from these women's systems

before they can enter true white suburban domestic bliss" (n.p.). Thus, ironically, the film does

not portray moms as moving away from the stereotypes of a good or bad mom but instead

portrays the women as having elements of both which oscillates within each woman but never

work together as a realistic blend.

Moving from fiction to reality, mothers in the spotlight such as Michelle Duggar, mother

of 19 from TLC's reality TV show *19 Kids and Counting* was portrayed as a good mother,

having as many children as possible without inhibition from birth control, raising her family

conservatively, and homeschooling her children. However, with the revelation of one of the

Duggar boy's molestation of his younger sisters, the media quickly turned on Duggar,

representing her as a bad mother, incapable of adequately protecting her children and giving

them each the attention they truly needed. The possibility of Duggar being a mother with many

good qualities but also with weaknesses, adding up to a realistic blend, has never been part of her

portrayed image. Renderings of mothers such as *Bad Moms* and Michelle Duggar are two cases

out of hundreds, showing the dualities of white motherhood which have resulted from an

adherence to Western binaries that are spoon-fed to women on a daily basis. Due to such cultural

influences, it is possible that mothers' view of other women and themselves as successes or

failures is shaped by their adherences or deviations from portrayed norms. In *Don't Blame

Mother*, clinical and research psychologist Paula Caplan comments on good or bad mother

depictions, explaining,

> Each myth rests near the Angel or the Witch pole of mother images…in the daughter's
>
> eyes, the Perfect Mother myths make all mothers' good efforts seem inadequate because
>
> they're imperfect, and the Bad Mother myths highlight mothers' failings…Mothers are as
>
> frightened of matching the Bad Mother myths as of failing to match the Perfect Mother
>
> ones; in both cases, they fear their offspring's (and other people's) rejection and scorn.
>
> (69)

Though Caplan does not specify race, her case studies are mostly of white culture.

Negative perceptions of mothers due to their failures to perform the "good mother" role have been analyzed by many theorists, especially from psychological and psychoanalytic backgrounds. Portrayals of flawed adults due to their interactions with mothers as infants goes all the way back to Freud, Jung, and Lacan;[17] however, in all these theories, the father is the focus, with the mother being either peripheral or included only to be blamed. Influenced by but also deviating from Freud, Karl Abraham introduced a focus on the mother, though a negative focus, with his emphasis on the bad mother, using the term for the first time in 1911, according to clinical psychologist Nahaleh Moshtagh. Additionally, object relation theorists Melanie Klein, influenced by Abraham, and D.W. Winnicott, influenced by Klein, are two psychologists who endorse the concept of the "good enough mother," who fails to attain "good mother" status but is the reality for most women.[18] Moshtagh explains, "Klein continued this line of thought and brought mothers to the scene. The good, nourishing, supportive mother became separated from the bad, attacking, persecutory mother in face of frustrations" (n.p.). In reviewing psychological interpretations of motherhood, Freud, Jung, and Lacan presented an underdeveloped but negative view of the mother, and Abraham presented a complete villainization of mothers. Contrastingly, although Klein and Winnicott's purpose was to emphasize that a mother is not actually good or

[17] Samuel Slipp, author of *The Freudian Mystique*, says of the Freudian Preoedipal period, "Instead of seeking to bond to the mother, Freud saw the infant a desiring only to satisfy inner instinctual drives. The mother is seen only as a distant object, used to gratify the child's needs" (92). "Making the mother into a passive object prevented her loss, and denied the danger of abandonment or engulfment" (93). To Jung, the mother is of more importance. Frances Gray explains that Jung believed in "the grounding of the feminine in a man through the mother" (56). However, this view only sees mothers as important due to their intersection with men, who remain the focus. Gray also acknowledges Jung's stereotypical depictions of women as types often tied to maternity, claiming, "Jung simply held mistaken views about women and the feminine" (147). Lacan, like Freud, focuses on the mother-infant bond but more intently focuses on the loss of the mother. While he presents the mother as an important figure, he fixates on her power negatively. Shuli Barzilai says of Lacan's portrayal of the mother, "[I]f motherhood be deemed part of the sacred, then Lacan inclines toward the portrayal of its dark pole" (216). She goes on to say, "Lacan describes the real, unsatisfied mother…as someone who continually seeks that which she will suck in and devour" (218).
[18] See Klein's *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* and Winnicott's "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not- Me Possession."

bad, showing that such a view is based on the infant's perception of a situation he or she cannot

yet understand, their work has helped propel images of mothers who fail from their children's

perspectives to live up to an ideal, which relates to the bad mother myth we continue to see

today. The litany of psychological maternal theorists such as Klein and Winnicott as well as

earlier foundation psychologists emphasizing good and bad mother theories are white theorists

whose findings are most applicable to white family dynamics.[19]

Andrea O'Reilly, an influential feminist scholar who specializes in analyzing

motherhood, chronicles influential theories of motherhood in her article "Across the Divide:

Contemporary Anglo-American Feminist Theory on the Mother-Daughter Relationship," a piece

that seems to promise some attention to the role of race in theorizing mother-daughter

relationships. O'Reilly rightly highlights that "a deep ambivalence…becomes organized around

polarized constructions of the mother. What is created is the Good Mother and the Bad Mother;

all that we find desirable about mothers is signified by the former and all that we fear and hate is

marked by the latter" (77). However, she fails to explore *how* and *why* this portrayal tends to be

so overrepresented in white culture. In her title, O'Reilly identifies the race of the theorists she

covers in her article, but she does nothing with this information. While looking at white theories'

application to the mother-daughter relationship, O'Reilly continues to only superficially examine

race. She does identify the influence of culture, "The lives of mothers and daughters as they are

lived are shaped by these larger cultural narratives," but she only looks at patriarchal culture as

---

[19] A lesser known but important author (who is also white and analyzes white culture) who has promoted the divide between good and bad mothers is Philip Wylie, who wrote his best-selling book *Generation of Vipers* in 1942. In this work, Wylie distinguishes mothers from moms, with the former being "good" and the latter being "bad." Wylie indicates that bad mothers smother their children, specifically their sons, making them unfit for serving the country. Another important author is Jean Liedloff's *The Continuum Concept: In Search of Happiness Lost,* which advocates that mothers need to follow native mothering concepts such as co-sleeping, on demand breastfeeding, etc. and that mothers who care for their children according to typical Western standards are bad mothers. The result of this bad mothering is children who come to some bad end, or so she warns.

an all-encompassing category, rather than examining how patriarchy differs according to race

and ethnicity (70). O'Reilly explains (and appears to mostly agree with) the thesis of white

feminist theorists who claim in different ways that mothers are devalued in culture due to

patriarchy and that girls internalize the negative associations with mothers and seek to avoid too

close of contact or emulation accordingly. This is probably because O'Reilly treats patriarchy as

a static system rather than recognizing that although patriarchal elements do exist in most

cultures, because men of color are oppressed by white society, their perceptions of themselves

and women may differ from that of white men.

When one attempts to go beyond pointing out polarizations of motherhood to analyzing

their roots, white women's associations with femininity and domesticity appear simultaneously

with a good mother status, which provides a differentiator for women of color, who have

historically been poor and/or enslaved, barring them from societally accepted enactments of both

femininity and domestic seclusion. Because most American colonies were transplants from

England and because English ideologies of family life continued within American homes even

after the colonies declared their independence, to go back to the derivation of "good"

motherhood's association with domesticity one must go back to the motherland.[20]

In *Monstrous Motherhood,* professor Marilyn Francus explores perceptions of

domesticity in 18th century Britain and claims that "the representation and assessment of

motherhood was most strongly shaped by the discourse of domesticity" (1). Francus goes on to

say, "Not all domestic women were mothers or wives…But they were all expected to adhere to

---

[20] This is not to say that as the U.S. has forged its own identity, its ideologies have not become separate from those of Great Britain. Critical whiteness sociologist Ruth Frankenberg argues, "Whiteness is inflected by nationhood, such as that whiteness and Americanness are profoundly shaped by one another. Thus, British 'whiteness' and U.S. 'whiteness' are both similar and different from one another" (633). Because I agree with Frankenberg and her argument on nationality's impact, my overall focus specifically analyzes U.S. white culture's perception of motherhood. However, in order to understand current ideologies of motherhood and womanhood, it is necessary to go to the source of such beliefs.

the gender profile exemplified by the domestic code: modest, chaste, pious, compassionate, and virtuous" (2). Such domestic mothers would be the good mothers while the monstrous ones Francus references in her title veer from the prescribed model.

In America, similar associations of women with the domestic sphere continued.[21] Bonnie Thornton Dill, whose scholarship focuses on the intersection of race and gender, explains the value placed on domestic women in eighteenth and nineteenth century America:

> The society was structured to confine white wives to reproductive labor within the
> domestic sphere. At the same time the formation, preservation and protection of families
> among white settlers was seen as crucial to the growth and development of American
> society. …Thus while women had few legal rights as women, they were protected
> through public forms of patriarchy that acknowledged and supported their family role of
> wives, mothers, and daughters because they were vital for building American society.
> (415-16)

While domesticity, when properly adhered to, did allow for belief in a type of feminine power, family therapist Kathy Weingarten argues that the bad mother possibility is closely tied to the agency of good mothering: "The more mothers were idealized and given power to do good, the greater the potential seemed to be that they might misuse that power and go astray, promoting

---

[21] In *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere,* Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that women, though they are expected to remain in domesticity, which is typically thought of as the private sphere, are present to an extent in the public sphere but only when they know their place in the home. Basically, women are positive topics of conversation and literature when they themselves are at home. Dillon advocates that women of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries were a topic of conversation in the public sphere, specifically through print, but only for men to ultimately reinforce the ideology that women's place was in the private sphere. Dillon's ultimate point is that women were consigned to the private sphere in order to support men in their role in the public sphere: "[M]en's participation in the public sphere is dependent upon an array of support services that are located outside of the political sphere in the realm of necessity – a realm designated as prepolitical, and, in the fiction of liberalism, populated by women…" (15). Thus, the purpose of advocating women's place within domesticity is ultimately to allow for the continuance of male success in the public (political) spectrum. Though Dillon does not delve into the concepts of good and bad women and mothers, to apply her work to these ideas, a woman is monstrous when she leaves domesticity because she no longer supports men's public success. Dillon also argues that people of color were designated to the domestic sphere in order to support white male autonomy.

evil and badness, and harming their children and society by their wrong doings in the realm of motherhood" (5). Thus, even when women performed the good mother role successfully, the shadowy possibility remained for slippage into the monstrous. In short, there remained the fear of the dichotomous female. Regarding 18th century England, English history and literature specialist Michael McKeon in *The Secret History of Domesticity* says, "The public regulation of both morals and finances was internalized in the domestic and private role of wife and mother. And whether or not it was fundamentally acknowledged, this internalization was often accompanied by the conviction that the state fundamentally depended on the family" (182). Thus, both Britain and early America advocated the idea that women were valuable when they were within domesticity because the home supports the state. Contemporary ideas about the public and private spheres being separate are something that Dill, Francus, and McKeon all suggest being less stark in earlier times because though the mother was only seen as "good" if she properly raised the children and supported her husband. Should she do this, she did indeed affect the public sphere.

The belief that good woman were associated with domesticity, which typically tied them to motherhood, adheres strongly to the concept of the Angel in the House, an extension of the principles of the cult of domesticity. This expectation of white middle-class women "to cultivate: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness" which originated in the 19th century has continued to influence American culture ever since (Welter 1).[22] A female encapsulating True Womanhood, according to historian Catherine Lavender, "should cultivate: piety, purity,

---

[22] In 1966, American historian Barbara Welter first used the term the cult of domesticity, which she used interchangeably with the cult of true womanhood in 1966. Welter published "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" in *American Quarterly*.

domesticity, and submissiveness" (1). Caplan acknowledges that the Angel in the House is actually white culture's positive half of the mother dichotomy: "The polarized images have long and complicated histories. In part, in Anglo-American culture, for instance, the idealized ones stem from our Victorian heritage, in which the mother was supposed to be the 'Angel in the House' who soothed her husband's and children's tired feet and fevered brows, spoke sweetly and gently, and considered meeting their needs her life's mission" (2). While such a mother is valorized, she is also adhering to a standard that is impossible to maintain.

Because a good woman and good mother persona have traditionally and currently depended so heavily on the woman functioning as a means to an end for men as individuals or society as a whole, many feminists have reacted strongly to the concept of motherhood. Lauri Mansky in *Motherhood Reconceived* reports that feminists have tended to view motherhood in one of two ways: either as an "oppressive institution, a compromise of women's independence" or as a positive role in which "motherhood minus 'patriarchy'…holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of the self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood denies to women" (2-3). While I believe that motherhood does indeed have the potential to enhance women's subjectivity and agency, in white American culture, conflicting and reductive ideas about women in general and mothers in particular continue to permeate portrayals of motherhood today. Much of the reason adheres back to traditional concepts of dichotomously viewing mothers as either "good mothers" or "bad mother" based on their association with domesticity. This myth is one that has long endured, and feminist and culture critic E. Ann Kaplan believes that "[wh]en a myth has such persistence, one can assume it touches something basic in the white, middle-class cultural unconscious" (15). This association with domesticity directly aligns

36

with white culture, as women of color have lacked the financial means and/or freedom to reside fully within the private sphere.

Depictions of Female Dichotomies in Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) is a perfect case study of how the concept of a dichotomous woman, specifically a dichotomous mother, plays out in a contemporary white-authored and focused text. Most of the claims Adrienne Rich makes in *Of Woman Born* about motherhood being poorly understood and represented are still true in white culture, as this novel proves. Ultimately, I will argue that while Kingsolver does seem to have an awareness on some level of the stereotypes of women and mothers and works to disprove them in places, at other times she still fall into them, likely due to her influence from mainstream culture. *The Poisonwood Bible* is the story of a Southern Baptist family living in Atlanta, Georgia; most of the setting takes place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Price family consists of the father, Nathan, the mother, Orleanna, and their four daughters: Rachel, Leah, Adah, Ruth May, in birth order. Due to Nathan's religious fervor, the family relocates to the village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo as missionaries during a tumultuous political time. They experience extreme culture shock and are unsuccessful in their evangelistic endeavors largely due to Nathan's Eurocentrism. In the end, Orleanna and two of her daughters leave the Congo after the youngest, Ruth May, dies; Nathan remains to continue his missionary work but essentially goes crazy and lives like a madman in the African wilderness. The story is told by all five of the Price females (including Ruth May who narrates posthumously at the end.)

The Poisonwood Bible has been well received by academia, and Kingsolver is perceived as a serious and influential writer. Because the novel explores an imperialistic theme and history, much scholarly criticism centers on postcolonial issues. However, although few scholars focus

on it, *The Poisonwood Bible* is a piece of white literature which is indicative of certain Western American assumptions about women and, more specifically, mothers. Kingsolver alludes to the history of propriety for good wives and mothers in her initial portrayal of Orleanna, who follows all of the rules. Orleanna is the typical Angel in the House. As a devoted housewife to her Baptist minister/missionary husband, Nathan, and primary caretaker of her four girls, Orleanna does embody the angelic characteristics of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. When she introduces herself to readers, it is domestic, family-focused characteristics that tie her to the Angel in the House: "Orleanna Price, Southern Baptist by marriage, mother of children living and dead" (7). Orleanna's view of herself is typical of a white mother in that she views herself through her association with her family and validates herself via her role as a caregiver.

Critic Melissa Schoeffel analyzes Kingsolver's works *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven* rather than *The Poisonwood Bible*. However, she notices something similar to my analysis about the portrayal of motherhood in these works and other works about mothers in contemporary texts: "I was interested in finding out how my selected authors represented motherhood in ways that both participate in and subvert the dominant ideology of the 'good mother' as a middle-class (white) woman who practices intensive mothering and devotes the majority of her time , energy, and resources (financial, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional) to the care of her children, as the opening chapter of Kingsolver's work shows" (5). Like me, Schoeffel recognizes the connection with historical expectations of white women and mothers and white mothers today:

> At the start of my project, my motivating question was, 'What is the relationship between power and suffering in contemporary women writers' stories about motherhood?' This question grew out of my study of the nineteenth-century ideology of 'the angel in the

house'—the self-sacrificing and pious moral compass of the middle-class home who

willingly offers up her own suffering as proof of her feminine worth. I saw this

nineteenth century articulation of a masochistic motherhood as integral to contemporary

ideologies of motherhood. (5)

Schoeffel does not work to closely contrast white ideologies of motherhood with minority

culture, but she does support my argument that white culture's current framings of motherhood

are remnants of historical expectations of white women.

Kingsolver is careful to show that Orleanna's adherence to the Angel in the House stifles

her, prohibiting her from achieving autonomy or respect from her husband or daughters.

Orleanna not only fulfills the role of a Victorian wife and mother as a sacrificial, martyr-like

caregiver but also a 1950s housewife, whose identity is historically centered on homemaking.

Such limited options for socially acceptable womanhood is what Friedan critiques in her 1963

work *The Feminine Mystique*. But, Orleanna is also presented as a "good wife," a sympathetic

character because of Nathan's harsh treatment of her. Nathan addresses his wife "in that same

special voice, for bad dogs and morons," belittling her in front of their children (133). Orleanna

says of their relationship, "Nathan habitually overlooked me" and when he does acknowledge

her, it is mostly to deride her for something (201). Leah says, "Even back when we were young I

remember running to throw my arms around Mother's knees when he regaled her with words and

worse, for curtains unclosed or slips showing—the sins of womanhood" (68). Orleanna is an

oppressed wife, and her daughters take note of this. Adah describes her mother as "folding her

hands in submission to Father's will" and questions whether Orleanna could ever separate herself

from her husband, "Can she allow herself not to believe him? I have never known" (74). Leah

does not believe such individuation under the marriage contract to be possible; she explains of her mother's relationship to her father, "She wouldn't go against him, of course" (13).

At face value, it may be tempting for readers to view Kingsolver's work as an effective critique of patriarchy. Nathan is presented as a heavy-handed husband who wrongly inhibits his wife from stating her opinion or acting apart from his approval. However, the fact that so much of Kingsolver's portrayal of Orleanna as a character emerges only through her marriage, including her role as a mother, adheres to antiquated beliefs regarding a woman's worth residing only in her enactment of wifely duties. Kingsolver locates Orleanna solely within her roles as wife and mother, two roles that, historically, both have very polarized spectrums. Kingsolver is a progressive woman herself. Schoeffel states, "Kingsolver writes from a liberal feminist, white middle class perspective…" (17). However, I argue that Kingsolver has internalized a type of feminism in which the emphasis becomes a women versus men issue rather than an exploration of how female-centered issues, such as social mores of dichotomous motherhood, can disempower women just as much as patriarchy. As a self-proclaimed feminist, Kingsolver certainly shows the problems with Orleanna's mistreatment as a housewife; however, she falls back on antiquated notions of good motherhood to help create Orleanna as a heroine-like character.[23]

Academic and cultural critic Maureen Ryan has noticed Kingsolver's supposedly progressive ideologies which are, upon closer inspection, less than so. Though she analyzes three other of Kingsolver's works in her article "Barbara Kingsolver's Lowfat Fiction," she comes to a similar conclusion to mine in acknowledging, "Kingsolver's fiction is so very popular because it is the exemplary fiction for our age: aggressively politically correct, yet fundamentally

---

[23] Several critics have acknowledged the texts' similarities to Alcott's *Little Women.* See Maureen Ryan, Kristin J. Jacobson, and Betina Entzminger.

conservative" (77). Applying this concept to Kingsolver's portrayal of motherhood via Orleanna, Kingsolver's blatant feminist agenda in critiquing the unjust treatment of Orleanna is quite politically correct; however, the rationale for Orleanna's mistreatment relies on conservative views of properly enacted motherhood rather than the value Orleanna holds as a woman outside of a performative domestic role. Ryan critiques the "dangers in Kingsolver's novels" as being "the soothing strains of that old-time religion, lulling us into oblivion with her deceptive insistence that if we love our children and our mothers, and hang in there with hearth and home, the big bad world will simply go away" (81). Such a message is dangerous because it suggests that mothers who have not properly performed at hearth and home are culpable, which is what I will soon show to be the case regarding Orleanna's portrayal.

Author and columnist Anne Kingston studies the current North American expectations of a wife and how they are rooted in antiquated ideas. She says of a wifely status, "The associations it elicits are bipolar in their scope: by the beginning of the twenty-first century, wife was variously presented as the source of female damnation or salvation, enchantment or disenchantment, captivity or rescue" (1). Actual mothers are not so rudimentary as to fit into the simple categories of the "good" or "bad" mother, and the same is true of reductive portrayals of a wife as good or bad, of which Kingston says, "The truth exists in neither" (1). Yet, Kingsolver does indeed present Orleanna's marriage as the source of her damnation; Nathan is Orleanna's primary antagonist. Though Kingston does not apply her theory to Kingsolver, her conclusion holds true for Orleanna. "The characteristics associated with the traditional good wife—servitude, subordination, self-sacrifice, summarized in the pejorative doormat –were discordant with the qualities of independence, 'self-realization,' and ambition glorified by the culture" (Kingston 3). Because Kingsolver is herself a modern woman and writing for a modern audience,

her portrayal most likely causes readers to despise Nathan and oscillate between feeling sorry for Orleanna and being frustrated at her lack of agency. Nevertheless, Kingsolver elicits a sympathetic response from readers by creating a woman who performs her "duty" well but is underappreciated, which still adheres to white ideologies. Orleanna only deserves sympathy from readers because she is a good wife and mother by traditional standards; she has followed the rules but is still wrongly treated. Kingsolver questions not the mores themselves but the injustice of a woman not earning the due rewards of such complicity. That Orleanna is not only a good wife but also a victimized one adheres to a polarization. Kingston cautions that "to cast someone as victim doesn't always serve her best interests. Presenting her in the black-and-white terms of victim adheres to the text that portrays the wife as passive and subservient. It suggests that wives, and by extension women, do not possess independent agency…" (151). Thus, the primary way in which a woman can be viewed sympathetically as a victimized wife hinges not upon her husband's improper behavior but rather her properly enacting the cult of domesticity.

Rather than challenging or critiquing the cult of domesticity as a problematic concept in general, Kingsolver focuses on Orleanna being unjustly accused of being a bad wife (and later, as I will explore, a bad mother), as she is, in fact, the good wife and mother by historical standards. In this manner, Kingsolver furthers the concept that a good wife and mother is a domestic one. This reification of domesticated nineteenth century proofs of good womanhood is one that both then and now is specific to white culture. Though Rich overlooks implications of race, even she acknowledges, "For white middle-class women in particular, the mystique of women's superiority (deriving from nineteenth- century ideals of middle-class female chastity and of the maternal) can lurk even where the pedestal has been kicked down" (xxiv). Ann duCille, a scholar on the intersection of race and gender, insists, "Despite its association with

days of yesteryear, however, the cult of domesticity remains alive, if not entirely well..." (280).

By using the cult of domesticity as Orleanna's alibi to wifely (and motherly) innocence,

Kingsolver shows the trope's continued influence even in the contemporary moment; this

suggests that despite her progressiveness as a contemporary feminist, Kingsolver still thinks

about and represents women in traditional ways that have continued to lurk within the fabric of

contemporary culture.[24]

Kingsolver's falling into a conservative portrayal of positive womanhood which seems to

contradict truly progressive feminism likely occurs because Kingsolver's primary purpose for the

novel is typically interpreted to be an imperialistic critique merged with an ecofeminism in

which exploitation of the land mirrors exploitation of women. Kingsolver herself has said that

her interest in "cultural imperialism and post-colonial history,"[25] influenced her to write the

novel. Thus, Orleanna works well as a symbol of subjugated Africa or industrialism's ravaging

of Eden paralleling men's mistreatment of women. In her dissertation over Kingsolver, Ceri

Martha Gorton reiterates this, saying that "explicit parallels indicate the novel's attempt to equate

the disempowerment by patriarchal forces of women, nature, and Africa" and that Kingsolver

does indeed "[adopt] the ecofeminist association of the oppression of women with the oppression

of a land" (184,185). Passages such as Nathan being in "full possession of the country once

known as Orleanna Wharton" (200) support this reading of a contrived usage of Orleanna in

which she is more symbol than realistic mother. However, the result is an antiquated trope of

---

[24] It is interesting that Kingsolver chose to create Orleanna as a Southern woman. Traditionally, the South has
largely championed the idea of the Angel in the House through the more regional embodiment of the Southern Belle.
The monstrous woman can, by comparison, be likened to the Fallen Belle. While I will analyze Orleanna from the
larger categories of angelic and monstrous woman or good and bad mother rather than a Southern or Fallen Belle,
the South's dichotomous symbols of their women serve as a further example of ways that white culture tends to
present polarized images of women.
[25] Harper Collins. "FAQs." *The Official Barbara Kingsolver Website*
http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp#question11 (accessed October 12, 2007).

motherhood which is far from the progressive feminist Kingsolver wants to be and is typically perceived to be.

In examining Kingsolver's shortcomings in failing to create Orleanna as a multifaceted character, the problem is not that Kingsolver does not give Orleanna paid employment. I advocate that the role of a homemaker can be one of agency and fulfillment for a woman and that a mother's day at home spent raising her children is both important and has economic ramifications, considering the cost of care if the mother does not provide it. Nor is the problem that Kingsolver unreflectively focalizes the story through Nathan or that she slips into a patriarchal framework for representing Orleanna. She clearly critiques patriarchy in presenting Nathan as an oppressive father and husband,[26] and thus, the issue is not that Nathan is unable to conceive of Orleanna beyond domesticity. Rather, the problem is that the narrative itself does not develop Orleanna's character beyond domesticity. Instead of wife and mother simply being aspects of Orleanna's identity, they subsume her identity. The text's narration portrays Orleanna simplistically; it does not only point out that her family perceives her this way. The daughters are shown to possess specific interests, talents, personality traits, etc.; yet, readers know very little about Orleanna beyond her association with her family.[27] The text's narration portrays Orleanna simplistically, and readers are only invited to view her as an appendage of her marriage and children. All her shortcomings and successes are tied therein. Kingsolver's tone and implied ideology, rather than critiquing the '50s and even '60s mentality and its limitations on motherhood, presents a lament of the limitations of motherhood.

---

[26] I am not arguing that fatherhood is always patriarchal but only that Kingsolver presents Nathan as a patriarchal man.

[27] The only interest of Orleanna's readers are eventually given is her love of gardening, and this does not occur until she has essentially moved beyond the roles of both wife and mother. Furthermore, of all potential interests, Kingsolver's choice of having Orleanna garden still locates her as a caregiver and keeps her within the private sphere.

While Kingsolver shows Orleanna as being wrongly treated by Nathan, being the quintessential underappreciated wife, she presents her much stronger in her interactions with and for her daughters. This dichotomous portrayal of Orleanna as simultaneously passive in her marriage but active as a mother aligns itself to an extent with the typical way that women are polarized. This portrayal is not, however, as simplistic as the angel and the monster. Sociologist Miriam M. Johnson, author of *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality*, posits a theory that is helpful in understanding Kingsolver's text. "[I]t is the wife role and not the mother role that organizes women's secondary status" (6). She argues that women are actually strong mothers but weakened by patriarchy's perception of a wife, which influences the way men and women behave in marriage arrangements. Ultimately, Johnson believes that the agency within mothering should be recognized as something commendable for women, which should in turn cause society to respect women in both the public and private spheres. Johnson, like Gilbert and Gubar, argues that society views women as fragmented into competing roles. However, while Gilbert and Gubar state that historically society has expected women to be either angels or monsters, Johnson suggests that many women occupy both spaces by virtue of being both wives and mothers. Johnson's idea that a woman can simultaneously be a strong mother but a weak wife is compelling and central to my reading Kingsolver's work.

Inherent in Orleanna's role of a good wife and mother is her powerlessness. Orleanna references herself as a "pale rat of a cowering mistress" and speaks of her "true helplessness" as Nathan's wife (94). When she is asked how serious she thinks Ruth May's illness is, she defers to her marital status as a sign of her inability to judge: "I have no earthly notion. I am a housewife from Georgia" (257). That she equates her being unqualified with being first a wife rather than a mother suggests she may feel differently about each role. Orleanna says that in her

45

wifely role she is "so thoroughly bent to the shape of marriage I could hardly see any other way to stand" (201). However, despite the handicap of her marriage, Orleanna sees it as a necessary evil for the good that comes from her position as a mother: "Had I not married a preacher named Nathan Price, my particular children would never have seen the light of this world" (324). Kingsolver points out that Orleanna's role as a wife cannot be a position of strength because any rebellion against her husband would impact her children. In reflecting on the choices she has made regarding her subservience to Nathan, Orleanna admits, "Oh, a wife may revile such a man with every silent curse she knows. But she can't throw stones. A stone would fly straight through him and strike the child made in his image…You understand that the things you love more than this world grew from a devil's seed. It was you who let him plant it" (191). While wife and mother are competing roles of weakness and strength, they are also interconnected.

There are two examples that show the difference in Orleanna's passivity as a wife but strength as a mother. The first happens when Nathan breaks the only nice plate Orleanna has in Africa because she says something he dislikes. Rachel narrates the episode, "Mother stood helplessly, holding her hands out to the plate like she wished she could mend its hurt feelings" (134). Rather than defending herself against Nathan's accusation that she cared too much for an earthly good, Orleanna agrees, "'You're right,' she said quietly, "'I was too fond of that plate'" (134). Because only she is hurt through the incident, Orleanna submits. In retrospect of her life with Nathan, Orleanna says, "How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness…A wife is the earth itself, changing" (89). Orleanna acknowledges that it is the desire to be a virtuous wife which often brings about misfortune. It is her wifely role which she views as initiating calamity: "Maybe the tragedy began on the day of my wedding, then" (323). The plate breaking episode shows Orleanna's passivity in regard to her own treatment. She also

remembers her wifely sacrifice early in their marriage, "drinking four glasses of water before he arrived so I could watch him eat whatever there was without my stomach growling" (199). If only she has to suffer, Orleanna is willing.

However, when it comes to the treatment of her girls, it is a different story. Any time Orleanna stands up to Nathan, it is not for herself, but for the sake or well-being of her daughters. Although she accepts her duty of accompanying Nathan to the Congo, her careful preparation is for her daughters: "[O]ur mother went to laying out in the spare bedroom all the worldly things she thought we'd need in the Congo just to scrape by. 'The bare minimum, for my children,' she'd declare under her breath, all the livelong day" (13). Orleanna finds motivation through her mothering; while she performs her role as helpmate, the role on which she fixes her attention is that of mother. However, because the girls have seen their mother embody such weakness as a wife, they often fail to positively view her burgeoning subjectivity as she begins emphasizing her role of mother over that of wife.

The first dramatic scene in which Orleanna allows her role as a powerful mother to supersede that of a submissive wife occurs when she acts untraditionally in order to protect her children. This takes place when Orleanna and Nathan are informed by fellow missionaries, the Underdowns, that the Congo will hold an election and receive independence, which will make the political climate unsafe for the family. Orleanna not only speaks to a male (Mr. Underdown) while her husband is silent, she raises her voice, exerts herself physically (banging her hand on the table), and swears. Yet, while Orleanna is finally being the strong mother a contemporary reader who values female agency would want her to be, Rachel, who narrates the section, views her far from heroically in this section. She describes her mother's appearance negatively, "It wasn't at all becoming" (163). She focuses on her mother's insecurity rather than her strength,

"She glanced back and forth between Mr. Underdown and Father like a nervous child herself, unsure which of the two men was entitled to give her a licking" (166). Finally, Rachel admits her own negative perception of her mother: "I was scared Mother would start swearing…or crying. How embarrassing" (166). Though Orleanna has risked being humiliated by Nathan in front of her daughters and guests by speaking her mind, Rachel only sees how such an outburst affects her, and she finds it uncomfortable. Having lived in the United States until the age of 15, absorbing as much popular and fashionable culture as possible, she has probably been influenced by a patriarchal culture in which positive wives and mothers do not assert themselves. Orleanna's last words of the scene are "For the girls, I'd like to…" but she is interrupted by Nathan. As the Underdowns have been arguing that the Price family needs to leave, Nathan has been insisting that they will stay; the implication of Orleanna's interjection seems to be that she wants to leave Africa with the girls regardless of Nathan's staying behind. Though Orleanna is not ultimately successful, she has gained immense ground in this section by vocalizing her desires, which will pave the way for her later autonomous actions. But Rachel does not seem to acknowledge her mother's growth, and though Rachel does not endorse her mother's usual passive acceptance of her father's treatment, neither is she able to affirm her mother when Orleanna breaks out of the mold. Kingsolver's depiction of a daughter's negative view of her mother due to their complicated relationship within patriarchy relates to what Rich points out as the difficult position of mothers. Men demand of women "institutionalized, sacrificial 'mother-love'" which occurs when women submissively raise their children according to patriarchal standards, but daughters simultaneously "want courageous mothering" which defies such passivity (Rich 246). However, daughters' hidden desire for a courageous mother conflicts with

socially sanctioned mores of submissive wives and mothers. Such is the case with Rachel and Orleanna.

As the story progresses, so does Orleanna's courageous mothering. When Nathan tells Leah she is not allowed to hunt with the village men, though a vote is taken in the village and the result is that she should be allowed, Leah storms off and Nathan attempts to follow her and beat her, but she escapes him. Nathan then stays up waiting for Leah, apparently to punish her upon her eventual return. Orleanna not only helps her remaining three daughters push furniture up against the bedroom door to bar Nathan from entering, but she also allows Leah to climb through the bedroom window later. This is the one time Orleanna does not sleep in bed with Nathan, choosing to sleep instead in the girls' room. Her refusal to go to bed with Nathan is a sign of her siding with her daughter. Furthermore, when Leah and Nathan's disagreement remains unresolved, resulting in Leah's staying away from home, Orleanna sends her food. When Leah and Nathan do finally discuss the issue and their differences, Rachel concludes, "Mother took sides against Father without saying so, in the noisy way she stacked the plates" (356). Johnson's argument that women are weak as wives and strong as mothers applies, as Orleanna does not act when only she is oppressed by her husband but does act when Nathan oppresses her children, which shows a potentially polarized depiction. Certainly Kingsolver's strong portrayal of a mother is praiseworthy; however, the fact that Orleanna is only strong when acting on behalf of her children still suggests an adherence to a dichotomous female representation with the wifely side associated with weakness, as has often historically been expected.

Orleanna ultimately leaves behind the Angel in the House persona because she recognizes her need to stand up for her daughters. Through her actions, she becomes a model for her daughters. Rachel stands up to Nathan when he will not allow the family to leave on an

airplane, though the result is a beating. Leah abandons her adoration of her father so completely

that in addition to leaving the house and hunting against his will, she states, "Father can go

straight to hell," and Rachel reflects, "Whether we said so or not, the rest of us certainly agreed

upon where Father could go straight to" (358). This outright defiance of their father occurs after

Orleanna's recovers from a tropical illness from which she and Ruth May have been suffering.

Orleanna's sickness could be read as simply an emotional breakdown, as her health fails after the

airplane leaves, at Nathan's insistence, without the Price family, and her illness seems to

coincide with her giving up hope. However, the illness certainly seems to have physical, as well

as psychological dimensions. Leah says of Orleanna's recovery, "Mother began pulling herself

together…Mother used her own reserves, without stealing the life out of Ruth May or anyone

else. She seemed to draw strength right out of the muggy air" (241). As part of her return to

health, Orleanna morphs from a weak mother, though a dutiful wife, to a strong mother: "She'd

gotten up changed from her month in bed. For one thing, she was inclined to say whatever was

on her mind right in front of God and everybody. Even Father" (243).[28] It is almost as if

Orleanna's illness and regained health is a symbolic rebirth from a weak to a strong mother,

something which begins before her illness but does not fully manifest until afterward. Leah

states, "I was shocked and frightened to see her flout Father's authority, but truthfully, I could

feel something similar moving around in my own heart" (243). The girls do not make the

connection that their own burgeoning agency is a result of their mother's increasing strength and

voice. Their lack of awareness that they are emulating their mother shows the strain in the

---

[28] The argument could be made that Orleanna is no longer a dutiful wife once she becomes a strong mother. My
reason for interpreting her as such stems from her continuation to perform her wifely role: cooking and cleaning for
Nathan. Indeed, she continues to share his bedroom which suggests she also makes herself sexually available for
him.

mother-daughter relationship in which the girls do not want to attribute their newfound autonomy to their mother.

Johnson speaks of the need for daughters to have strong mother role models, "If we preserve the mother-wife distinction, one might look at daddy's girls as in training to be wives" (184). Johnson argues that fathers parent their daughters in a way that is gendered differently than they treat sons,[29] raising sons to be independent leaders while raising girls to be dependent and passive, anticipating their role to be a demure and subservient wife. Johnson also says that weak wives, following their husband's lead, often parent their daughters differently than their sons in compliance to patriarchal values, which continues the cycle of raising daughters to be future weak wives. Kingsolver shows Nathan's training of his daughters to become weak wives, "My father says a girl who fails to marry is veering from God's plan…" (149). Furthermore, Nathan views himself, as a male, as superior to the rest of his family, "He often says he views himself as the captain of a sinking mess of female minds" (36). However, as Johnson argues, "[I]f daddy's girls are to gain their independence, they need to learn to construct an identity as the daughters of strong mothers as well" (184). Though Kingsolver does not show the Price daughters as appreciating Orleanna's burgeoning strength as a mother, they are influenced by her nonetheless. The girls all go on to live independently with strong identities of their own; thus, Kingsolver's text showcases the influence that strong mothers can have on the identities of their daughters.

Orleanna and Mother-Blame

Although Orleanna is portrayed in a polarized fashion in regards to her wife and mother roles, thus far in my discussion, Kingsolver has depicted Orleanna sympathetically. In portraying

---

[29] Though Nathan does not have any sons, his ideologies, which align with Johnson's description of patriarchal family structures, suggest that if he has sons, he would treat them differently than he treats his daughters.

Orleanna as the opposite of the novel's antagonist, her husband Nathan, Kingsolver celebrates

Orleanna's maternal strength and shows the difficulty women face in patriarchal marriages,[30]

emphasizing Orleanna's growth in eventually resisting. However, regardless of a sympathetic

portrayal regarding Orleanna's marriage, mother-blame abounds within the text both in regards

to the daughters' view of their mother and the mother's view of herself. O'Reilly argues that a

perception of mothers as either "good" or "bad" impacts the mother-daughter relationship: "This

ambivalence about maternal power, along with fear of the maternal, mother-blame, cultural

devaluation of motherhood and matraphobia, distance daughters from their mothers and scripts

the relationship of mother and daughters as one of disconnection and estrangement" (78).[31]

Weingarten says something similar, "[M]other blaming—and the ubiquitous splitting of mothers

and mothering into good and bad, right and wrong, that underlies it—has exerted a powerful and

destructive influence on family life" (3). At first the mother-blame in Kingsolver's text functions

as evidence that she is actually aware of the issue. Kingsolver shows that mother-blame exists

because of the daughters' incorrect view of Orleanna, due to patriarchal culture's influence. In

such cases, Kingsolver is actually to be commended for drawing attention to an important issue.

In these moments, Kingsolver signals to readers that the daughters' view of Orleanna as a "bad

mother" is incorrect. Daughters, the author suggests, often misinterpret their mothers because

they cannot see the full picture of her life.

---

[30] Some may argue that Kingsolver's text relies too heavily on the victimization of the mother. Kingsolver only shows mother-blame as misplaced in a situation in which a mother who is perceived by the children to be bad is actually a mistreated, domestic woman. A more realistic portrayal of Orleanna may have avoided her total responsibility regarding domesticity. It is worth exploring the challenges of motherhood and the issues that arise in the mother-child relationship even when there is a present and supportive husband/father, but Kingsolver sidesteps these concerns, possibly because it is easiest to make Orleanna a strong though misunderstood mother when she has an obvious antagonist in her husband.

[31] I agree with O'Reilly in reference to U.S. white culture, but such is not the case with women of color.

The welcome feast the Africans throw for the Prices their first night in Kilanga serves as a good example of Kingsolver's critique of mother-blame. When the Price family is served foods foreign to them which they detest, Rachel narrates her mother's actions: "Mother… whispered at us in the awfulest, hissing voice: 'Girls, you be polite, do you hear me? I'm sorry but if you spit that out I will thrash you to an inch of your lives.' This was mother, who'd never laid a hand on us in all our lives! Oh, I got the picture, right there, our first night in Africa" (29). Rachel realizes that her mother is not going cater to her daughters or even respond to their wants. While readers can sympathize with Rachel's resistance to eating unfamiliar food and surprise at being harshly spoken to, any parent reading the text will probably quickly recall food battles with children who refuse what they are given. Being a good parent often means being a bad parent in a child's eyes by forcing them to eat nutritiously. However, even beyond the typical parent-child food battle, it is likely that Orleanna, as a 1950s southern housewife, would be well-versed in the art of being a good hostess and guest; therefore, her interactions can also be read as her attempt to pave the way for friendly relationships with the Congolese by insisting that the girls play the part of grateful guests. Should she allow her daughters to offend their hosts by refusing the food, she may be a good mother in her children's eyes in that moment but is ultimately a bad parent by potentially putting them in social disdain, which may even equate to physical harm in a strange land if the family does not quickly create and/or maintain a network to help assist them.[32] While Kingsolver does not divulge Orleanna's motivations in making her daughters eat the food, the naïve and childish tone in which Rachel speaks, which is typical for her character, as well as the

---

[32] Kingsolver shows the Price's extreme need which is filled for a time by Mama Tataba, who assists with cooking, gathering food, teaching social protocols and avoiding dangerous elements of the jungle, and which is later filled, though not to the same extent, by Nelson, who offers his services free of charge due to his friendship with Leah (38, 93).

ambivalence surrounding Orleanna's actions, indicates that there are more ways to interpret the mother's actions than Rachel's one-dimensional interpretation.

Similar parenting struggles occur at other times during the Price's time in the Congo. The girls balk at having to do schoolwork, "'Congo or not, it's back to school for you girls.' She's determined to make us scholars…We were all chained together in her game plan" (104.) They also resent having to stay inside, "She dreamed up a hundred and one excuses for keeping us inside the house even when it wasn't raining. I missed my freedom" (146). However, Kingsolver's telling these accounts from the daughters' perspective rather than as fact from an omniscient narrator prompts readers, to, again, question the reliability of the narrator, recognizing that, in actuality, good parents do require their children to receive an education. Good parents also protect their children from physical harm, and in the Congo where there are many dangers outdoors, it is understandable that Orleanna would want the girls to remain inside for at least portions of the day where she can better watch them. Kingsolver does not go so far as to defend Orleanna, just as most mothers have no defense against their daughters' misperceptions of them, but the way in which she develops the story, especially later when the daughters do come to harm when they disobey and go out of doors without permission, shows that Orleanna is far from exercising an irrational authority over her children.

One of the ways that Kingsolver manages to combat the girls' blaming of their mother is to provide part of the story from Orleanna's perspective. For instance, Kingsolver provides Leah's perspective of her relationship with Nathan when Leah reflects, "I like spending time with my father very much more than I like doing anything else" (36). Readers are also privy to how Leah believes her mother views her relationship with her father, "I sometimes went out to sit with him, even though Mother held it against me" (77). Leah believes Orleanna resents her

time with Nathan because Orleanna feels rejected. However, later in the narrative when Kingsolver allows Orleanna to speak for herself, a much different perspective emerges, "Leah followed him like an underpaid waitress hoping for the tip. It broke my heart. I sent her away from him on every pretense." (98). In actuality, Orleanna's feelings and actions are not of jealousy but protection.

Although most of *The Poisonwood Bible* is told from the daughters' viewpoint, theorists such as O'Reilly and Hirsch argue that contemporary culture has moved beyond daughter-centric modes in which daughters speak for their mothers, which actually functions as a kind of silencing for mothers. In the old model, Hirsch maintains, "It is the woman as daughter who occupies the center…The woman as mother remains in the position of other" (136). Perhaps in keeping with this new model that seeks to upset the old, daughter-centric one, Kingsolver does allow Orleanna to narrate sections of the text herself. However, regardless of the fact that Orleanna does get a voice in the text, she is still largely marginalized. Out of a 543 page novel, Orleanna's sections take up only 36 pages. While Orleanna is able to give her side of the story regarding why she attempts to pull Leah away from Nathan, there are many other things her daughters misconstrue that she is never given a chance to address. English and women's studies professor Mary Jean DeMarr points out that five of the six sections of the novel[33] begin with a chapter narrated by Orleanna; however, "[t]he sixth book lacks an introductory passage by Orleanna" (DeMarr 122). Indeed, Orleanna's perspective becomes less significant as the narrative continues. Each time she speaks, her words are shortened, dwindling from twelve pages, to eleven, to eight, to five, to being completely silenced while the daughters alone speak. Furthermore, Orleanna is not allowed to tell the story in present tense as the girls are but simply

---

[33] Kingsolver divides the work into seven "books" or sections, six of which are named to reference the Apocrypha.

to reminisce, creating her as a somewhat antiquated character while the daughters carry the excitement of advancing the plot line. DeMarr, though not focusing on mother-blame and misrepresentation, concludes regarding Orleanna, "She is a relatively subordinate character, at least in comparison to her daughters" (126). The argument could be made that although Kingsolver allows Orleanna to have a voice, she still marginalizes her in ways that are indicative of traditional daughter-centric texts.

While Kingsolver often shows the mother-blame in the text to be juvenile, the scarcity of Orleanna's perspective offers a weak combatant for showing the truth. Also, although Kingsolver discredits the mother-blame through highlighting the daughters' naivety, she offers no absolution from the problem that the daughters regularly misunderstand and misjudge their mother. O'Reilly argues in her text *Mothers and Daughters* that at least a portion of society has moved beyond the misconceptions of the past and claims that "most Anglo-American feminists, since at least the mid-1980s, regard mother-daughter connection and closeness as essential for female empowerment" (144). Kingsolver, as O'Reilly says is typical, shows an awareness that both the Price daughters and Orleanna's lack of empowerment instigates their fraught relationship, and she presents their angst-filled relationships as problematic. However, she does not show there being any way that Orleanna could have avoided the tumultuous relationship she has with her daughters.[34] Even once the daughters come to see their mother more accurately, "Our mother

---

[34] Kingsolver's apparent acceptance of mother-daughter angst can, to an extent, be made sense of through Nancy Chodorow's theory of why daughters respond to their mothers as they do which she advocates in her influential work *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow argues that society has enforced an expectation upon the family unit in which the mother is the primary caregiver. Because mothers have been acculturated to motherhood, they in turn raise their daughters to adeptly function within domesticity and to desire motherhood themselves. Chodorow argues that the children negatively responds to the lack of power they perceive the mother as having in relation to the father specifically but the culture at large as well. This eventually creates a dynamic of tension between the mother and the daughter because the daughter recognizes her similarities to her mother but also realizes the limited role that her future holds; Chodorow believes that it is the mother role that allocates women their secondary status. However, while Chodorow's theory is often universally applied, it is actually only applicable to white families.

used to have mystery under her skin, and we paid not the slightest attention," the damage has

been done (220). When Rich penned her famous words, "The loss of the daughter to the mother,

the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy…there is no presently enduring

recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture" she did not simply seek to bring awareness

to the issue (237). She sought to promote change. However, Kingsolver's text, along with many

other white-authored ones,[35] despite its acknowledgement of the "loss of the daughter to the

mother, the mother to the daughter," actually provides little hope.[36]

     While I have already listed examples where Kingsolver brings attention to the daughters'

incorrect interpretations of their mother, ultimately showing that in each scenario Orleanna is a

good mother, there is also a much deeper form of mother-blame in the text which Kingsolver

seems herself to promote. Orleanna's descent into being a "bad mother" coincides with the

climax of the story, when Ruth May dies of a poisonous snake bite. Although readers do not

know the details of Ruth May's death for more than half of the book, the event is referenced by

Orleanna early in the story. In fact, every section Orleanna narrates is overcome with guilt for the

death of her youngest in which she makes self-deprecating and remorseful statements as she

---

Indeed, Chodorow's theory works so well with Kingsolver's novel because the Price family is the exact type of family Chodorow considers: Western, white, middle-class nuclear family.

[35] Flannery O'Connor is an example of a white author who presents fraught mother-daughter relationships without any indication that the mother is actually misperceived. Two short stories which exemplify this are "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find." A fraught mother-daughter relationship also occurs in Dorris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, with all the mothers in the book occupying a negative position. I realize Lessing is actually British rather than American, but she represents all the same concepts of contemporary white Western society's lack of realistic and positive mother depictions.

[36] The daughters' negative view of their mother aligns well with Dorothy Dinnerstein's argument in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. Dinnerstein argues that society resents female power because women primarily raise children and are, therefore, the first real authority figure with which one comes into contact, and that negativity felt in childhood continues into adulthood. Because of the childish perceptions everyone initially feels when disciplined by a mother or mother figure, Dinnerstein maintains, "To mother-raised humans, male authority is bound to look like a reasonable refuge from female authority" (175). In apply Dinnerstein's theory to Kingsolver's text, the girls' mother-blame stems from their resentment of her authority over them. However, the theory works so well because Dinnerstein only addresses commonalities of white culture, as white families are the ones who mostly adhere to the model of the mother being primarily responsible to raise and discipline the children.

reflects over her life. Because Orleanna is a "good mother," she holds herself to the typical

standard of white culture, "primarily responsible for raising healthy, well-adjusted children"

(Weingarten 21). For losing Ruth May, Orleanna holds herself to blame. Orleanna appeals to the

reader as if she is on trial and the readers are the jury. She indicts herself saying, "Be careful.

Later on you'll have to decide what sympathy they deserve. The mother especially…" (5).

Orleanna assumes her audience's judgment of her: "I could have been a different mother, you'll

say. Could have straightened up and seen what was coming" (87). Although there are times

Orleanna seems to defend herself, she ultimately works as her own prosecution: "I had warnings.

How can I bear the scent of what catches up to me?" (89). Even years after Africa, Orleanna

continues to punish herself, "[S]he constantly addresses the ground under her feet. Asking

forgiveness. Owning, disowning, recanting, recharting a hateful course of events to make sense

of her complicity" (492). Orleanna holds herself solely to blame for her daughter's death and

readers are left feeling as if Orleanna is at least somewhat at fault for her own and her family's

misfortunes. Barbara Seaman claims, "For many women, the way you spell mother is G-U-I-L-

T" (qtd in *Mothers and Daughters* 205). This trope of mother-blame which is so inherent in

Western white culture permeates the text.

Kingsolver's emphasis on Orleanna's guilt is complicated because she is careful to show

that Orleanna, in actuality, has a strong case to make for her innocence. Orleanna does not want

to travel to Africa in the first place, and she is not even present when Ruth May is bitten by the

snake; it is the older sisters who lure Ruth May outside against their mother's instruction.

Additionally, of course, it is Orleanna who attempts to find a way out of Africa for her and her

daughters, first trying to persuade Nathan to leave and then making a plan to leave that does not

include her husband,

She declared she was taking us out of here as soon as she found the way to do it…She had even asked Eeben Axelroot flat out if he would take us…he…confided to Mama that every man has his price. From the looks of Mama, she means to pay it (243)… Mother already secretly offered him her wedding ring plus a thousand dollars, which supposedly we'd dig up after we got back to Georgia without Father… (269)

When Orleanna realizes that she cannot be a good mother and a good wife, she is even willing to desert the virtuous wife role, giving Axelroot the promise of paying his price, which, based on Axelroot's character, could imply sexual favors; at the least, Orleanna is interacting with a lewd man of which proper society and especially her husband would never approve.

One might ask how Kingsolver endorses mother-blame when she so clearly presents Orleanna as an abused wife with few options, having no money or connections apart from her husband. Scholar of American literature and women's, gender and sexuality studies Kristin J. Jacobson has argued that Orleanna is a good mother. She claims that "Orleanna, however, is not…a failed mother" (110). She goes on to say, "*The Poisonwood Bible* also presents the mother as an exceptional character…" (109). However, such a reading of Orleanna is based not on Kingsolver's portrayal of Orleanna or Orleanna's perception of herself but an intuitive reader's ability to transcend mother-blame. One must recognize that Kingsolver herself does not simply include mother-blame in the text to show that it is a reality in women's lives or even to critique it. The text actually advocates the idea that Orleanna is a flawed mother in need of forgiveness. Regardless of the fact that Orleanna is a victim herself, she is still responsible for her children's undoing. Orleanna admits she did not try hard enough but was instead self-centered, a sure indicator of a "bad mother," "I preoccupied myself with private survival" (98). In the final chapter, Ruth May speaks in some kind of spirit form, having returned to the earth

and become one with Africa. Her narration offers her mother forgiveness, suggesting that Orleanna is indeed an imperfect and guilty mother: *Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for long as long as we both shall live* I forgive you, Mother" (543). The image with which Kingsolver leaves readers is a guilty mother who admits, "[A]fter thirty years I still crave your forgiveness" (385), who is forgiven by a benevolent daughter. Such an idea, that despite her lack of options, Orleanna is still guilty is directly influenced by white culture, where the mother is expected to be an ever-present entity. Kingsolver offers no counter to the assertion that Orleanna needs Ruth May's forgiveness.

Kingsolver aligns Orleanna with domesticity in showing that she is a wrongly accused wife, but she distances Orleanna from domesticity when she becomes a bad mother by inadequately protecting her child. This adheres to traditional concepts which connect a good woman with domesticity but distance a bad woman from it. Although feminist readers cheer to finally see Orleanna leave Nathan, the subtle undertone of mother-blame (standing up to her husband is not enough to bring her daughter back to life) occurs simultaneously with a withdrawal from domesticity after Ruth May's death. There seems to be an underlying ideology that although Orleanna is sorry, she is still guilty and therefore rightly realizes she can no longer inhabit the domestic space reserved for the Angel. After lovingly caring for the body of her youngest child and preparing it for burial, Orleanna carries all the family's possessions from the house into the yard to give them away. Her grief at losing her child, whom she admits in her own narration to be her favorite, ultimately causes her to literally rid herself of domesticity. In explaining her actions, Orleanna says, "[H]ow useless it all seemed now" (382). By eliminating

these things, she makes it impossible for her to perform her 'duty' as a wife as well as her motherly role properly.[37]

While the primary argument for Orleanna being a bad mother who must be distanced from domesticity is losing her youngest, the insinuations extend to the overall dissolution of the Price family. While readers cheer when Orleanna leaves Nathan, Orleanna presents her strength as a weakness because it is so long in coming, "I didn't set out to leave my husband. Anyone can see I should have, long before, but I never did know how" (383). Really Orleanna loses most of her daughters, though only Ruth May dies, because she does not keep her family intact. Rachel leaves Africa with an older man to whom she becomes a mistress, and Leah stays behind in the Congo with the promise of a marriage to an African man. Only Adah does she take to the United States. Rachel later says, "[O]ur true family fell apart after Ruth May's tragic death" (465). Adah says, "She would drag me out of Africa if it was her last living act as a mother. I think it probably was," suggesting that Orleanna no longer mothers after leaving Africa and Ruth May behind (414). The daughters all seem to realize the impossibility of their mother's situation, but this does not keep them from having ambivalent feelings about her, to say the least. The white cultural narrative posits that the family is the mother's responsibility. Even if Orleanna has no

---

[37] Jacobson argues that rather than reproducing domesticity in typical nineteenth century fashion, Orleanna recycles it, aware of her white privilege and its reliance on imperialism. Jacobson terms this recycling of domesticity from something inhibiting to something socially responsible "neodomestic." While she does admit that Ruth May is the catalyst for Orleanna's leaving Africa, Jacobson presents Orleanna as mostly focused on the white exploitation of the African natives. She believes Orleanna rejects traditional domesticity for neodomesticity in which the home is valued as a new way to be revolutionary. While I agree that the home can and should be such a place of agency, I do not believe Kingsolver shows Orleanna as setting up such a home after she leaves Africa. While it is true that Orleanna becomes aware of and disapproves of imperialism, her leaving has nothing to do with this; she wants to leave for her daughters' safety, and she finally leaves once she has "failed" to keep Ruth May safe. Rather than Orleanna leaving domesticity for something better (neodomesticity), I believe Kingsolver, though without cognizance of the implications, separates Orleanna from domesticity because traditionally, bad mothers are always separated from domesticity. Kingsolver is, unknowingly, following a long established tradition of mother-blame. Jacobson's postcolonial reading overlooks the importance of gender and the feminine roles of wife and mother from which Orleanna cannot separate herself to become a social justice activist.

choice in initially breaking up the family, they seem to feel that she does not try hard enough to reunite and repair relations with her children afterward.

Adah, though living near her mother in Atlanta, at times feels simultaneously abandoned ["Speaking became a matter of self-defense, since Mother seems to have gone mute" (407)] and suffocated ["Mother wanted to consume me like food. I needed my own room" (409)] by Orleanna. She is tormented by why her mother chose her: "Would she rather have had Ruth May?...Am I alive only because Ruth May is dead?" (413). Adah also worries that her mother will end up 'choosing' Leah when her family temporarily moves to the States: "[A]nd Mother will be theirs" (444). Yet, while Adah needs her mother, this does not prevent her from wanting to punish her for their time spent in Africa. In one of very few open discussions with Orleanna, Adah admits to her mother that she had been tempted to burn her father in his bed but did not because her mother was also in the bed. Though the actual conversation ends here, the unspoken dialogue Adah imagines is as follows: "*Then why didn't you? Both of us together. You might as well have./ Because then you would be free too. And I didn't want that. I wanted you to remember what he did to us" (496).* Although Adah understands the deep oppression Orleanna suffered as Nathan's wife, she is still unable to exonerate her from the motherly duty of protecting her children. Kingsolver, again, offers no counter to Adah's belief that her mother should be punished. Thus, even though in some ways, Orleanna acts as a good mother more for Adah than the others, as she is the daughter she removes from Africa, Kingsolver shows the complicated mother-daughter relationship. Although Adah and Orleanna are close in proximity, there is a barrier that neither can completely eradicate.

Continuing the mother-blame, Rachel is miffed that Orleanna does not come to visit her and the luxurious hotel she comes to own in French Congo. She feels that Orleanna needs to get

62

over the past and Ruth May's death: "I get the idea Mother especially is still moping around" (465). Throughout her girlhood, Rachel blames her mother for not protecting her well enough or being sensitive enough to her needs. This mentality of mother-blame in adulthood seems to simply be an extension of the feelings she has always held. While Rachel blames her mother for not coming to visit her, she does not consider travelling to the U.S. to visit Orleanna, although Rachel has ample funds for the trip and is much younger than her mother to make such a journey.

Leah, though she has perhaps the most complicated relationship with her mother during her girlhood due to her initial allegiance and reverence of her father, is the most understanding of her mother upon reaching adulthood. Rather than blaming her mother, Leah is mostly preoccupied mourning Ruth May's death and blaming herself for her role in it, as she is the one who coaxed her sisters outside of the house on that fateful day. Leah is simply estranged from Orleanna. She understands that correspondence between the States and Africa is slow and unreliable, so she does not expect much communication. Yet, although her family comes to live in Atlanta for a short period of time, Leah no longer feels comfortable in her mother's world. Long a daddy's girl (though the relationship was mostly one-sided) Leah fixates more on the loss of her father than the loss of her mother. She states: "I must leave Father behind me…I understand that he's dangerous to me now" (435). Her chosen separation from her mother is something she does not dwell upon at all. In fact, she even appears to resent the visits she does make home to see Orleanna. She states she and her family never would have traveled in the first place had it not been for her feeling the obligation to visit her "aging mother" (472).

Thus, although Kingsolver portrays Orleanna as a strong mother, standing up to her husband for the sake of her children, once one of her children comes to a bad end, all Orleanna's

good intentions and growth toward becoming a woman of agency appear to count for naught: she is "the woman who could not fight fire with fire, even to save her children" (140). Feminist counselor Joceylin Chaplain says, "Mothers, like other symbolic people, are supposed to be good or bad, never both" (43). For all Kingsolver's forward feminist thinking in denouncing patriarchal marriages, she still follows a very static pattern regarding her creation of the mother figure. Though her daughters often misunderstand her, Orleanna is first a good mother when she stands up for her daughters, but she is irrevocably banished to the bad mother camp once Ruth May dies, which results in the dissolution of the family and extends the girls' trials as they are forced to fend for themselves in various ways.

The final chapter of the novel ends with Orleanna and her three daughters reunited in Africa, and one could argue that this is an indication that their relationship has been restored. The narration positively explains their interaction: "They have come here to say good-bye to Ruth May or so they claim. They wish to find her grave. But in truth they are saying goodbye to their mother. They love her inordinately" (539). However, the fact the women only reunite to mourn their sister's death shows a lack of regular intimacy. They do not congregate frequently and when they do, it is for a specific purpose rather than to simply enjoy life together or even assist one another, "These four have not been together in one place since the death of the other" (539). Furthermore, the daughters ultimately want some kind of closure with their mother, which is much different than seeking or obtaining intimacy with her, which would necessitate frequency of contact between them. The daughters love their mother, but even in most dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships there is usually some kind of love. I would argue that daughters can and should be able to do much better than secretly love their mothers. The relationship of the Price women does not exemplify a healthy or empowering depiction of mothers and daughters.

It is worth exploring why Kingsolver seems to suggest that regardless of what they do and do not do, mothers will still feel guilty for the ways in which they mothered. Feminist author and journalist Susan Maushart argues that we must "unmask motherhood." English professor Elizabeth Podnieks, along with O'Reilly, draws on this term and advocates in their co-written article that "the mask of motherhood confers an idealized and hence unattainable image of motherhood that causes women to feel guilt and anxiety about their own (often messy and muddled) experiences of mothering" ("Maternal Literatures in Texts and Tradition" 3). Yet, though neither Maushart nor Podnieks/O'Reilly specifically identify white culture as endorsing this mask of motherhood, Kingsolver's text is just one example of a mother who not only feels guilt for mothering but who is also portrayed, in certain ways, actually to be guilty. This mask of motherhood is very much so a component of white culture, which has placed motherhood on a pedestal no woman can ever perfectly perform. Rich insists, "The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" (223).

Kingsolver's internalization of the idea of a guilty or bad mother relates to Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels work *The Mommy Myth* in which they identify the "new momism." They explain the mommy myth as "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children" (Douglas and Michaels 4). They go on to say that this is the "latest version of what Betty Friedan famously labeled the 'feminine mystique' back in the 1960s" (5). Friedan has been critiqued for using a white, middle-class woman model, and the mommy myth propelled by mainstream culture does the same today. Douglas and Michaels argue that contemporary culture, primarily through the media, has

influenced people to expect super mom and to assume that if anything goes wrong in the family unit, the mother is to blame. Kingsolver propels this ideology of high mother expectations; the text's conclusion suggests that Orleanna has failed since something bad has happened to her family. Not only has Ruth May died, but her other three daughters are permanently scarred from their childhood experiences. Yet, this idealization of motherhood as a preventer of all dangers is not a universal perception of mothers. Douglas and Michaels claim that it is specifically American culture that "seeks to take us all by reinforcing one narrow, homogenized, upper-middle class, corporately defined image of motherhood" which posits the unattainable image of a perfect mother nurturer and protectress (22).

The dualism Kingsolver includes regarding Orleanna of first a good but then a bad mother may have less to do with perceptions of women in general and more to do with ideologies about motherhood, which I would argue is still quite a convoluted topic in today's mainstream white culture. Even though society as a whole has moved beyond depicting 'women' categorically as simplistic, the role of mother is still often perceived as a trope of either goodness or badness. Caplan references such beliefs as myths; they are untrue but still hold cultural sway, "The Good Mother Myths set standards that no human being could ever match, such as that mothers are always, naturally 100 percent nurturant…The Bad Mother Myths allow us to take mothers' neutral or bad behavior—because mothers are human, so we do some bad things—or even mother's good behavior, and transform it into further proof that mothers are bad" (239). Caplan does not specifically identify this good and bad mother myth as a white, Western construct, which speaks to my point that many feminists apply what are actually white manifestations as universals. However, duCille does make the racial connection: "[T]he quintessential good mother in the national romance is the true woman/White daughter" (293). As

will become clear as women of color's texts are addressed, although the good and bad mother myth has roots in many cultures, it is currently most prevalent in white culture.

Thus, the conclusion of *The Poisonwood Bible* is bleak. In contrast to O'Reilly's claim that contemporary texts repair the mother-daughter relationship and reclaim a mother's own story and voice, Kingsolver's text serves as a model for what I would argue is the bulk of white literature today: a continued legacy of mother-blame and mother-daughter angst. Admittedly, I have only explored one text to represent a large group; however, there are countless others that could prove the same point which supports the conclusion that authors continue to be influenced by white cultural beliefs about motherhood.[38] In unpacking Kingsolver's motivation, conscious or subconscious, I would argue that a large part of her agenda in writing the novel was to critique Western American ideologies about Africa. Indeed, she critiques imperialism and American greed in general. However, the mother role is so central to the text that it is an oversight for readers to only focus on postcolonial issues and to avoid issues of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship. Kingsolver is an example of the difficulty many white authors have in moving away from a high expectation of mothers. As Nathalie Poy says, "Mothers are either sanctified or demonized" by society and "literature reveals the fault lines in how we construct motherhood" (111). While one may expect a 1950s/60s mother to cling to high expectations of traditional motherhood, one hopes to find more progressive thinking from a contemporary author known to focus on social justice.

---

[38] For example, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* endorses mother-blame through the depiction of a racist and patriarchal mother unable to understand her daughter, The 2015 film *The Meddler* pokes fun at a mother, played by Susan Surandon, by showing her as being well-meaning with the intentions of a good mother but actually a bad mother by smothering her daughter, which results in her distancing her daughter from her. Fox Searchlight Pictures' 2017 drama film *Gifted* depicts a mother who is so obsessed with living vicariously through her mathematically gifted daughter than she drives her to commit suicide.

Exemplification of Multifaceted Mothers in Chicana Culture through Alvarez's

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents

To contrast the white American ideologies that *The Poisonwood Bible* embodies, which I would argue are at least somewhat representative of contemporary, white, female authored texts, I will analyze the mother-daughter relationship in a text by a woman of color, using the same ideas about female duality—the wife and mother roles—many women hold. I have found the mother-daughter angst within white culture to be something of an anomaly which is not shared with other racial groups. Accordingly, I could have chosen any non-white group to make a comparison, but I have chosen to contrast Hispanic culture's views on womanhood and motherhood with the ideologies of white culture previously discussed. It fits well as a comparison because, as opposed to being a culture that has not struggled with a female dichotomy myth, Hispanic culture actually contains one quite similar to white culture.[39]

Hispanic American culture (which will also interchangeably be referenced by the terms *Latina* and *Chicana*)[40] has been influenced by ideologies of female duality in which a woman who successfully performs domesticity, usually including motherhood, is angelic, and a woman who rejects or unsuccessfully performs domesticity is monstrous. According to literary critic and historian Nina Baym, Chicana culture specifically alludes to three traditional figures: the virgin, the raped one (or sometimes the whore), and the crying woman. The virgin is, of course, Mary,

---

[39] In subsequent chapters I will choose a different racial/ethnic group with which to contrast some aspect of white culture as it relates to concepts of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship.

[40] Stephanie M Wildman argues, "There is a downside to naming Latinas/os as a group, because this act of naming essentializes a highly diverse population, making it appear as a homogenous whole. The term essentializes many highly diverse communities—the Cubanos, Puerto Ricanos, Chicanos—all into one lump. To talk about Latinas/os means ignoring the diverse and many-faceted groups encompassed in this term" (324). While I certainly do not mean to imply that all people falling under the term "Latina" or Chicana" are the same, I do find that people influenced by Latin culture tend to have a similar social upbringing regarding family and social expectations for women and mothers. For this reason, I have chosen to use the term. Also, "Latina" and "Chicana" are terms widely used in scholarship and criticism to mean something similar to what I mean when I use them.

the mother of Christ. She is often referenced as the Virgen de Guadalupe in Hispanic culture, so named for her four appearances in Guadalupe. The raped one is La Malinche, who historically was the guide, interpreter, and lover of Cortés. (In some accounts, Cortés takes advantage of her sexually.) According to author Shep Lenchek, she is often seen as a traitor, having led an invader into her country, and is perceived as the opposite of the Virgin both due to her association with sexuality and her anarchy, allowing Mexico to be conquered by Cortez.[41] Of the Virgin and La Malinche, Chicana feminist Dolores Huerta says,

> The desirable aspects of Mexicana/Chicana womanhood based on La Virgen de Guadalupe are piety, dedication, humbleness, selflessness, dedication to family, and virginity. The undesirable traits, as embodied in La Malinche, are treachery, lying, deceitfulness, and sexual promiscuity. Although other cultures usually describe this distinction between women as a "virgin-whore" dichotomy, in Mexican or Chicano culture the dichotomy is tied specifically to these two figures rather than a general distinction with no cultural or historical referent. (n.p.)

Although traditionally La Malinche has negative associations, contemporary feminists find agency through her. Ecofeminist Imelda Martín Junquera says of her, "This powerful icon rescued by Chicana writers as the example of the imposition of patriarchy upon the indigenous peoples becomes a model for modern Chicana writers as the mother of the race." (77). Thus, while La Malinche is the opposite of the virgin, contemporary theorists do not always perceive her negatively.

According to folklore, the weeping woman La Llorona drowns her children to spite her unfaithful husband and then drowns herself. La Llorona is not simply a "good" or "bad" woman,

---

[41] In actuality, La Malinche had no say in being given to Cortez and was nothing but faithful to him, acting the part of a dutiful wife (though she was only a mistress.)

but is more specifically the "bad mother." She is not allowed to enter the afterlife until she finds her children, so she searches the river, weeping. (It is rather unclear whether she weeps for them, herself, or some mixture of both.) Sociologists Denise A. Segura and race relations scholar Jennifer L. Pierce claim that La Llorona "dramatically describe[s] the evil fate in store for women who deviate from the 'norm' of the 'good' mother" (77). However, in *Woman Hollering Creek*, Sandra Cisneros turns the crying woman into a powerful figure in which she "rewrites the tale of La Llorona, a tale of male dominance and female submission and treachery, into a story of strong women who, in solidarity with one another, transform the powerless lament into a battle cry of resistance against male dominance" (Junquera 78). Like La Malinche, she is being reexamined as a symbol of female agency.

As all three figures—the Virgin de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona—are mothers, they collectively show the close connections of Latina female tropes related to maternity. Like white culture, Latino culture has a history of static polarizations for women, and like U.S. feminists, contemporary Chicana authors have critiqued the traditional expectations for and stereotypes of women. They have worked to present women realistically, being neither perfect nor lost causes. In addition to feminist Latina authors seeking to avoid the cultural dichotomies associated with women, there is also the white stereotype of Hispanic women with which to contend. Media sociologist Teresa Correa claims, "In the entertainment industry, Latinas have been historically depicted as 'virginal', 'passive', 'dependent on men' or as 'hot-tempered', 'tempestuous', 'promiscuous' and 'sexy'" (427). At their core, these extremes are not that different from the European derivatives of the angel and the monster. Scholar of Spanish and Portuguese Asunción Horno Delgado argues something similar in noticing dichotomies of both white and Latin women, "[I]n the mass media…the portrayal of the Latina has tended to be

70

either as an angel or a whore. While white women were also similarly stereotyped" (13). Although I am analyzing literature rather than entertainment and media, it is important to understand how mainstream America portrays Chicana women because these portrayals are what many rely on as their source of information when viewing Latinas, especially since ideologies are often influenced by popular culture. Delgado writes of the importance of resisting such reductive portrayals: "In constructing herself as a subject, a Latina must dismantle the representation of stereotypes of her Self constructed, framed, and projected by the dominant ideology" (14). Many Chicana authors purposely resist such reductionism.

The traditional Hispanic woman's role, like the cult of true womanhood and domesticity in white culture, maintains that women serve solely as wives and mothers and defer to their husband's authority. In Hispanic culture, the angelic version of femininity is associated with the mother role, which is referenced as *marianismo*. However, whereas white culture propagates an idealistic expectation of motherhood which is so unrealistic that mothers cannot live up to it and, in turn, have a complicated relationship with their daughters who have internalized patriarchal expectations of motherhood, the contemporary literature of Latina culture presents a more positive relationship between mothers and daughters. This does not mean that Hispanic patriarchy and *machismo*[42] do not impact women and the mother-daughter relationship, but Chicana women have dealt with their oppression differently than white women, and have, overall, maintained and celebrated their bonds between mothers and daughters.

An example of the way Latino culture effectively embraces a realistic portrayal of motherhood is apparent through Esmeralda Santiago and Joie Davidow's *Las Mamis,* which is a

---

[42] Machismo is a Spanish term which references a heightened sense of masculinity associated with sexuality and traditional male qualities of courage, power, and strength. While there can be positive aspects of machismo, such as a husband/father properly providing for and protecting his family, it is often used to oppress women and coincides with patriarchy.

collection of essays written by admired Latino/a authors about their mothers. Rather than portraying their mothers as either "good" or "bad," the authors portray them as multifaceted. Santiago and Davidow identify similarities amongst the stories, "[I]n some of the most moving essays, we sensed that the author used our book as a way of making amends with Mami, of showing her that she was appreciated after all. And many of the authors were able to begin to understand Mami's point of view, to demystify the mother and see her as a woman, not as a powerful being who had given or not given, but as a fellow adult, who had struggled and tried and sometimes failed" (xi). The mothers in these essays are not perfect and do not have perfect relationships with their children, but there is grace, love, and a cultural understanding of a mother's value.

One of the ways that Latina culture has traditionally supported and maintained mother-daughter bonds is through honoring family in speech and conversation. Alma Gomez, one of several editors of a collection of short fiction by Latina authors, reports, "Most Latinas, in looking to find some kind of literary tradition among our women, will usually speak of the 'cuentos' our mothers and grandmothers told us…But we can no longer afford to keep our tradition oral" (vii). This cultural norm of celebrating the mother's voice and female family history is something that white culture either does not discuss or does not have.[43] White women

---

[43] While much has been written about the importance of oral storytelling in native and/or indigenous cultures, very little has been written about white culture's participation with oral storytelling. For example, in *Women Words: The Feminist Practice in Oral History,* edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, the compiled authors explore oral storytelling by women of all colors but say nothing about white women specifically other than pointing out that women of color adhere to different traditions. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis says, "[T]he white female experience as norm presents its own set of problems. To take a white, middle-class female's experiences as a given and generalize to all other women ignores the experiences of women of color and working-class women" (44). This point that the white experience is not the universal is valid; however, in terms of exploring oral narratives, this anthology and others like it are problematic in that because scholars are concerned about universalizing whiteness, they do not examine it at all in reference to orality but instead defer to how native cultures have expressed themselves differently than dominant cultural narratives. In my own study, I have observed that white culture has oral stories that are usually fairy tales (most of which endorse the "bad mother" in terms of a step mother, evil queen, witch, etc.,) fables (which

tend to find literary foremothers who are not their own flesh and blood. Perhaps this practice is

nowhere better illustrated than in white feminism, which invented the idea of literary

foremothers to celebrate women who have written throughout history and claim them as artistic

mothers. Gender studies and feminist literary historian Victoria Joule explains, "There has not

only been a rediscovery of literary foremothers, but a selection process and reinvention of those

women who best fit the role of mother" (34). Joule goes on to say, "Where third-wavers or post-

feminists battle against their mothers, the literary world has found the possibilities a matrilineal

history offers to be attractive, and particularly the opportunity to select those mothers most

suitable for the role" (45). Perhaps because white culture has so many expectations of white

motherhood, Western feminism went the route of celebrating "literary foremothers" who could

be hand selected. Many of those chosen for the role—Woolf, Brontes, Austen, Wharton,

Dickenson, etc.—were never biological mothers, suggesting that the combination of a worldly

successful woman and a biological mother is a difficult role to fill according to the current

standards for maternal perfection. Thus, although claiming non-related literary foremothers is a

celebration of women, the fact that this has, by and large, been done at the expense of white

women claiming and aligning themselves with their biological mothers does reflect the fraught

mother-daughter relationship in white culture. "Mother" as a symbol is attractive, but as a reality

she is undesirable. Successful, mostly academic white women are uninspired by the lives led by

---

focus on animals and teach a moral, typically non-gendered lesson), or historical legends (which are male focused, such as Paul Revere, Davey Crockett, etc.) Storytelling is not seen in white culture as being especially feminine or strengthening female bonds. In white culture, women's talk is devalued as "wives' tales." In contrast, women of color's roles regarding orality often emphasizes gender. According to the University of Nebraska's website *Native Daughters*, "Women's responsibility to continue the culture and sacred ways occurs in many Native cultures. The woman holds the past, present and future in her hands through her knowledge, compassion and strength. Despite repeated attempts at annihilation, Native people remain. Tenacity and fortitude have made them survivors. Storytelling is a way to further the continuation of life in modern society."

their own mothers so instead desire to connect with women who never were mothers, which allowed them to achieve things less easily obtained by their own mothers.[44] While I am currently analyzing fiction, rather than autobiographical portrayals of mothers, Hispanic female authors, even in fictional accounts, honor the place of the mother and may be influenced by their matrilineal line. Author and maternal feminist scholar Fiona Joy Green explains, "Motherlines help mothers teach children the skills of survival, independence, and the importance of remembering one's history and culture…Daughters develop and nurture their female subjectivity and creativity by identifying with their mothers and relating with their motherline" (261). Because white women do not have to fight for their cultures and histories to be valued, they are often less vigilant about preserving their motherline.

In analyzing Chicano/a culture, one must, of course, acknowledge the diversity of Latina culture, which can encompass those living outside of the U.S. as well as those living within it. I am going to focus on U.S. Latina culture and the mother-daughter relationship within this cultural group by analyzing Julia Alvarez' *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. From the title alone, it is clear that this work focuses on issues of immigration, assimilation, native tongue, and identity, and the scholarship on the text tends to focus on culture, race, imperialism, and the binaries that are asserted by and within those social constructs rather than maternity. Several scholars have acknowledged the role that binaries and the purposeful avoidance of binaries play within Alvarez' text. Academic Trinna S. Frever argues that Alvarez does not "reduc[e] the girl-characters' quests for a positive cultural identity into simple binaries of self/other or dominant culture/subjugated culture…" (135). Scholar David T Mitchell says, "Alvarez attempts to

---

[44] As Woolf writes about in *A Room of One's One*, a woman needs time and space to perfect her craft and financial independence in order to write well; this is something that few mothers have readily had at their disposal historically and something that is still difficult to obtain, even in white culture, for many mothers today.

destabilize the binary of the postcolonial writer's 'absence' from or 'presence' in a geographical homeland" (166). In reference to their varying social positions on the island and in the states, critic Jennifer Bess argues Alvarez "refus[es] to classify the Garcías clearly as victims or victimizers (79). All three critics praise Alvarez's avoidance of reductionism, but, interestingly, do not consider the female reductionism that she also avoids.

Critical race and ethnic studies scholar Wendy Ho explains that white culture tends to create binaries in which women of color, in opposition to whites, are, according to women's and gender studies scholar Chanda Mohanty, "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized," (qtd in Ho 33). As Ho highlights, these "binaries privilege the voices and experiences of middle-class white women as the norm" (33). Obviously, there are many binaries into which Alvarez could have easily fallen in the creation of her text. Her careful positioning away from such problematics shows a determination not to adhere to reductionism. Feminist and U.S. Latina scholar Alvina Quintana argues that rather than Chicana authors having to choose from a binary in which they must either align themselves with Latino patriarchy or white feminism they can "[contribute] to a new perspective which is influenced by, but not limited to, either Anglo-feminist or traditional Chicano ideologies" (259). I would argue that Alvarez does just this.

Although Alvarez's work certainly has a feminist flair, the nuances of the mother-daughter relationship and how that relates to Latina culture historically as well as American Hispanic culture in the contemporary moment has only been very minimally (and I would argue incorrectly) addressed.[45] In mainstream theories of motherhood, Latina culture is rarely

---

[45] In "The Power of Two: Mothers and Daughters in El Caribe," Antonia Garcia-Rodriguez and Maria Antonia Rodriguez briefly analyze the mother-daughter relationship in Alvarez's text, along with two other Spanish-speaking Caribbean ones. However, I find their conclusions that "[t]he girls' mother models ambivalence to her daughters…and internally sees herself as a failed mother and wife" (73) incorrect, as well as completely unfounded

addressed. Delgado suggests that "failure to acknowledge Latina(o) presence and culture reaffirms the concept that U.S. culture, and hence its literature, is only white and middle-class" (5). Therefore, I hope to draw attention not only to U.S. Latina literature in general but to connect it specifically with mother-daughter focused texts.

As Kingsolver's text is indicative of white-authored female texts, I am using Alvarez's text as an example for what I detect as a pattern amongst Latina authors.[46] *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) works well as a companion piece to *The Poisonwood Bible* because both works focus on four daughters, and both texts explore the girls' relationship with their mother. Both texts shift perspectives from one chapter to the next, though in Kingsolver's the characters speak in first person while in Alvarez's the narrative is often told in third person but from a particular character's perspective; Yolanda is the only character to occasionally narrate a chapter in first person. There is something of an omniscient narrator in Alvarez's work, which does not occur in Kingsolver's, allowing for more objectivity in the portrayal of the mother. Both texts permit the readers to get to know each daughter individually as well as the mother. Also, both texts deal with characters who are culturally displaced: The Prices relocate to Kilanga from the U.S., and the Garcías relocate from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. The motivation between the two moves is quite different, however. The former is undertaken as a missionary effort while the García family leaves to escape from a dictator. Even here, though, there are

---

in any textual evidence. In *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing,* Benigno Trigo claims that Alvarez, along with seven other Latina and Latin American women authors, "interrogate, interpret, elaborate, and rewrite a patriarchal maternal imaginary that results in a symbolic, discursive, and phantasmic matricide that in turn threatens to leave us permanently depressed and melancholic, if not suicidal" (4). Trigo does not specifically claim that Alvarez does this in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* but that she does it in her collection of essays. However, I believe such an attitude toward motherhood would certainly influence her novel. While I agree Alvarez rewrites patriarchal maternity, I do not believe, as does Trigo, that she has a "matricidal drive," which according to Kristeva, means females can only achieve individuation if they commit symbolic matricide. I find this belief to be a form of mother-blame which is mostly rooted in white culture.
[46] I could have chosen Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* or *Woman Hollering Creek,* Ana Veciana-Suárez's *The Chin Kiss King*, or Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* or *The Agüero Sisters* to highlight similar issues.

enough similarities related to cultural displacement to make some interesting observations. Additionally, the two plots are set in similar eras and cover broad spectrums of time; the Price girls grow up in the late '50s and early '60s, and the García girls grow up during the late '60's. Finally, both texts were published in the 1990s, so both authors were influenced by the same time period.

Because so much contemporary and postmodern literature is now written by people of color, some theorists studying conceptions of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship tend to claim that the agency and understanding they see taking place in the relationship is evidence of the growth of society as a whole in contemporary times. However, the fact that most of the texts exhibiting these characteristics are written by women of color, whose cultures value mothers with agency and view them with appreciation and understanding, is important to consider and suggests that there is a difference in perception between white culture and minority cultures in the U.S. I have already shown ways in which Kingsolver's work, though contemporary, still falls into the traps of mother-blame and a representation of the mother figure who is either good or bad. Furthermore, not only the characters in the novel ascribe to this narrow categorization of women and mothers (which may not necessarily mean this is the author's viewpoint and could actually be used as a technique for the author to point out what is amiss), but also Kingsolver herself indicts Orleanna as a mother in the way she constructs her narrative.

In contrast, Alvarez creates a well-rounded mother figure in her novel. Laura García is not presented as a mother who either entirely embodies the "good mother" or the "bad mother." Nor is Laura a disempowered female who is unwilling to stand up for herself and her four girls, named Carla, Yolanda (Yoyo), Sandra (Sandi), and Sofia (Fifi) in birth order. Alvarez's creation

of her mother figure is even more telling because, as has been mentioned, Hispanic culture is similar to white culture in that both have a legacy of women traditionally being viewed as either good or bad, and mothers have traditionally been perceived as good only when they defer to male authority. Though Alvarez locates Laura within domesticity and motherhood, she goes beyond making Laura a one-dimensional character because the author does not limit her representation to wife and mother.

While contemporary American culture, regardless of the race, has tended to move away from extremely traditional gender roles, intractable ideologies about women can still be seen in white-authored portrayals of mothers. Alvarez's presenting the mother role and mother-daughter relationship differently than Kingsolver suggests that although Hispanic culture also has patriarchal roots, it has not impacted female portrayals and relationships in the same ways. Her novel, which is semi-autobiographical,[47] answers to how she has resisted white, dualistic thinking about women and mothers. In "A Note from the Author" following the text, Alvarez describes her own fractured and repaired relationship with her mother, which is reflective of the healthy mother-daughter relationship she advocates in her novel. She explains that after *García Girls* was published, her mother stopped speaking to her because she was worried that the autobiographical elements could get their family into trouble, as her mother had grown up in a dictatorship. However, Alvarez explains that over time, "my mother was herself transformed,…facing her own erasure, her own past in that dictatorship that made her fearful of letting the stories out. She asked me to forgive her. She became one of my biggest champions" (296). Alvarez acknowledges not only her mother's mistakes but also her own, "Over the years I,

---

[47] Critic Jennifer Bess calls the work an "autobiographically based novel" and the Garcías a "semi-fictional family" (79). Critic Julie Barak says, "In many ways the stories of the García girls are repetitions of Alvarez's own stories" (161).

78

too, had been chastened…And it took years for my mother to face her furies, to come around. It took years for my own imagination to make room for her fears. Why we have to be brave. Why we need each other's stories to tell and enlarge our own" (296). Alvarez's honest telling of her relationship with her mother, similar to the relations she presents in her novel, does not suggest that conflict can be avoided in mother-daughter relationships but that it can be overcome and that it need not define the relationship.

Laura and her husband Carlos are aristocrats in the Dominican Republic where Carlos is involved in resistance against the dictator. To avoid capture, the family relocates to the United States where Carlos continues to work as a doctor, but the family's economic status is reduced to that of working class because Carlos is initially only granted a fellowship.[48] The text chronicles the girls' upbringing in both the Dominican Republic and the U.S. Laura, as an immigrant, has something of a changing identity as she acculturates to the United States. However, even before she relocates, the narrator explains, "Laura is raising her girls American style, reading all the new literature" (202). Furthermore, the girls claim that their father is more traditional: "'Old world stuff,' Carla says. 'You know he got a heavier dose than Mami" (65). However, regardless of Laura's modernity in some areas, she is still quite traditional, not believing in things like premarital sex for her daughters. She states of her and her husband's beliefs, "We don't believe in all this freedom" (59). Thus, she is a mixture of the modern and the traditional woman, already showing herself to be multifaceted.

---

[48] Alvarez' text is rather atypical of American Hispanic motherhood in reference to the high degree of economic stability the García family experiences in the Dominican Republic; according to the organization Feeding America, *"Latino households experience disproportionate levels of poverty and have lower household income than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts" (*"Latino Hunger Facts"*).* However, the Garcías' economic status diminishes upon their arrival in the U.S. to a status more typical of American Latinos.

In fact, Alvarez challenges the stereotypical American idea that because Hispanic culture is traditional, the women are completely dominated. She presents not only Laura but also her female relatives back in the Dominican Republic as strong women. When Yolanda travels back to the island, she recognizes her cousins as "women with households and authority in their voices" (11). Thus, though traditional white and Latin culture places the woman within domesticity, the domestic sphere is more revered as a place of strength in Hispanic culture. This reverence of domesticity connects with the mother-daughter relationship. According to professors Antonia Garcia-Rodriguez and Maria Antonia Rodriguez, "Respect is core to the relationship between madre e hija (mother and daughter) in Latina culture" (75). The daughters respect their mother's role not only because they view it as a likely one for themselves but also because they recognize its value in the culture at large. Women, specifically mothers, are esteemed in Latin culture. Susan Sánchez Casal, scholar of Spanish and women's studies, explains, "[T]he socially sanctioned moral superiority of the Latina allows her to exercise considerable power in the domestic sphere, especially with regard to the rearing of children. It also creates a space in the Latino imaginary for the 'strong capable, insightful woman'" (336). Of course, the caveat is that mothers only have this place of strength when they adhere to the system, "as long, of course, as their actions do not defy the power of men" (Casal 336). In *García Girls*, Laura has a sense of power in the family that Orleanna never has because mothering well relates to Chicana cultural pride. Segura and Pierce explain that "a woman's mothering is part of her Chicana identity" (78). Contemporary mainstream U.S. culture, in contrast, is one that highly values individualism and encourages people to separate from their parents, mothers specifically, rather than valuing familial ties. As culture scholar L. Robert Kohls puts it, "Americans tend to think they have been only slightly influenced by family... In

80

the end, each believes, 'I personally chose which values I want to live my own life by'" (n.p.). This differs from Chicana culture in which one honors maternal rearing and where mothers are recognized as having a strong influence. Orleanna and Laura are not simply fictional characters but represent beliefs about a woman's place as a wife and mother in white and Hispanic cultures.

White women appear to have internalized subservience, which daughters recognize and do not want to inherit,[49] causing them to incorrectly blame (and distance themselves from) their mothers rather than society, possibly causing friction between mother and daughter. Contrastingly, Chicana women have bonded together in an unspoken belief about how to function within the system: "The dynamics of *Marianismo* are transparent in this example: Latina women assume the pedestal by believing that they are morally superior to men, yet they understand that the only way they may remain on the throne is by hiding their feelings from men and not acting on what they know. Powerful, but closeted, female subjectivity: the queen must assume the posture of the servant to preserve her title" (Casal 339). However, Casal goes on to explain that Latina women are becoming "increasingly unwilling to assume that posture" (339). As she becomes more Americanized, Laura is an example of a woman stepping outside of the *marianismo* role of allowing the husband to rule. The narrator says of Laura's views, "Better an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave" (144). This perspective contrasts with strict ideas that the Dominican women in the extended family hold. Tía Flor states, "'Look at me, I'm a queen…she argued. My husband has to go to work every day. I can sleep until noon, if I want. I'm going to protest for my *rights*?'" (121). Tía Flor, like many traditional Latinas, is willing to enact the angelic wife and mother role in order to be well provided for by her husband and to maintain power in the home. Alvarez gives a rationale for traditional male/female relations but

---

[49] Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Dorothy Dinnerstein all speak to this in their work.

ultimately seems to suggest that the most progressive ideas are those of the protagonists, the García daughters, who resist any ideology that endorses female subjugation, even if it inadvertently allows for some degree of power.[50]

Although Alvarez avoids a reductionist portrayal of motherhood, she makes an interesting choice in referencing Laura primarily as "the mother." In fact, Alvarez does not disclose Laura's name until almost halfway through the novel. If Laura were analyzed simply through this form of reference, her identity would seem to be encapsulated solely by maternity. However, there is some irony in the fact that while Alvarez mostly references Laura as "the mother," she expands Laura's identity beyond that of a mother. Referencing Laura in such a way may cause readers influenced by white culture to question their assumptions about motherhood when they read "the mother" character pursuing her own ambitions or veering from traditional "good mother" habits.[51] Or, it may cause them to seek out Laura as a character beyond her *marianismo* role in sections where they realize Laura is only being portrayed through her daughters' eyes.[52] Also, this technique of identifying a character by their familial role is something that Alvarez applies to other characters as well (i.e. 'the father,' 'the daughter,' etc.) and may stem from the importance of family and familial roles in Latino culture.

Challenging the idea that a successful mother must submit to the limits of domesticity, Alvarez highlights the agency Laura pursues once the family lives in the U.S., "Mami was the leader now that they lived in the States. *She* had gone to school in the States. *She* spoke without a heavy accent" (176). With her expanded freedoms, Laura begins to see herself apart from her

---

[50] By the '50s, U.S. culture is no longer invested in narratives of feminine domestic power, while that argument persists in Hispanic cultures. Thus, the women in each book have different senses of their power and status.
[51] Examples of traditional good mother habits are deferring to male authority, mothering in an isolated home setting, and finding one's identity solely in wife and motherhood.
[52] This is similar to what Kingsolver successfully does when she presents Orleanna as a "bad mother" through her daughters' eyes but suggests to readers that Orleanna is actually being misjudged by her daughters, which is something an intuitive readers easily picks up on.

relationship to her family, "Recently, she had begun spreading her wings…dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself" (116). Yet, Alvarez does not associate any stigma with Laura's desire to be more than a mother. Though Hispanic culture reveres the mother role, Alvarez develops Laura as a character beyond her domestic role. She shows Laura to have an interest in business, brainstorming inventions to patent and taking courses in economics and management. Laura fosters her own ambitions even though her husband is a successful doctor. This differs from the problematic model Orleanna and many women in white culture adhere to in which a woman aligns herself with a successful man through marriage as the primary means of achieving success herself because, historically, it was socially unacceptable for a middle-class wife to work.

Johnson takes note of this pattern in which women tend to use their energy to support their husband to be successful rather than seeking success themselves, and though she does not specify a racial group that grounds her theory, she does acknowledge that white culture mostly endorses such a model: "In the 'modern family,' middle-class white women in the United States were increasingly defined as wives and in fact their life chances increasingly depended on who they married. Women's fortunes depended on getting and keeping a man who was better off than they were to 'provide' for them and their children" (232-3). Though women of color are often also required to rely on men financially, the alliance does not ensure financial security. Johnson suggests that women of color may be less likely to see themselves as oppressed by their husbands because the men are also oppressed by white culture: "Hispanics in this country have used the solidarity of the family and kin as their primary source of support in a hostile world. Thus for them it would seem counterproductive to condemn the masculine privilege within the family that is exercised by oppressed men" (234). Thus, while a feminist reader may easily

critique a system in which Orleanna has no choice but to rely on her husband, that same reader

must acknowledge that although Laura is dependent on Carlos, he is only able to minimally

provide for the family in their early years in the U.S. As feminists, we must account for the racial

and socioeconomic realities that impact experiences of womanhood and motherhood. Alvarez'

text shows less division between the wife and mother roles than Kingsolver portrays. This occurs

through less division between Laura and Carlos; Laura's agency can equally be seen through her

mother and wife roles. Though patriarchy exists, it is less inhibiting, especially within the

Garcías' family unit where Carlos is often portrayed as a loving father and husband. In addition

to giving Carlos positive characteristics, Alvarez also accomplishes a more positive portrayal of

masculinity by portraying Carlos as a victim due to his immigrant and non-white status, though

he is still flawed due to patriarchy.

Some may argue that Laura's agency is not influenced by Hispanic culture but is actually

a result of Americanization. While most scholars note the girls' assimilation, gender studies

scholar Fatima Mujcinovic claims Laura's assimilation makes her a more liberated character,

"Their mother opposes their Americanization only at first since she herself adopts some new

practices: she becomes more emancipated and self-reliant" (181). While I agree that many

contemporary American feminist views do provide agency to women, as I have been showing,

the same is not always true for views of motherhood with American feminism, which suggests

that Laura's maternal agency may come from her Hispanic roots rather than her newly claimed

American identity.[53] Of American feminism, sociologist Arlie Hochschild says, "Feminism is

---

[53] The same can be said of Orleanna. She does not become a strong mother because she has American (i.e. white culture) roots. Although the majority of *The Poisonwood Bible* takes place in the African Congo where the Prices have little interaction with other whites, the mother-blame and mother-daughter rupture is not indicative of African culture but actually shows how the Prices have held onto their own cultural norms and mores regarding femininity, being either unwilling, unable (or both) to relinquish them. Thus, Kingston appeals to Western ideologies about femininity and motherhood even as the setting is far from this. English professor Brad Born goes so far as to claim that "the novel is ultimately interested not in Africa but in a white American woman's good-hearted morality tale"

infinitely easier when you take motherhood out, but then it speaks to fewer women" (qtd in

Baker and Kline xv). This shows that while American feminism has a liberating message when

applied to women in general (and seems to be one that Laura has absorbed about female agency),

American feminism tends to disregard how motherhood fits into the equation, distancing

motherhood as a feminist enterprise or simply discounting its presence with an autonomous

female experience.[54] However, due to Laura's strong Latina culture which values motherhood,

her internalization of American feminism blends with her previously held views on motherhood,

allowing her to be a multi-faceted wife and mother.

To show the range of influences for Laura's strong mothering, Alvarez is careful to show

that Laura does not only have agency when she is in the United States. She acts bravely to

protect her family in the Dominican Republic when the family is visited by guards seeking to

arrest her husband. Furthermore, when the girls spend time on the island, Laura disciplines them

for smoking marijuana, "She had come to find out the truth, shielding Papi from the news and

the heart attack he would surely die of if he knew" (115). Carlos is portrayed as being too

traditional to be able to parent in this scenario, while Laura is able to adapt to the situation. In

another incident when the girls are in trouble back on the island for allowing Fifi to be

unchaperoned with her boyfriend, it is again Laura who handles things, shielding her husband

from such a culturally unacceptable situation. The room where Laura deals with her daughters is

---

(n.p.). While I hesitate to maintain that Africa is simply a convenient setting to further an end, I agree that the
emphasis on white womanhood is largely not impacted by the African setting.

[54] An example of the American public's belief that motherhood is somehow a separate issue from feminism can be
seen in the title of Washington correspondent for *The Daily Beast* Michelle Cottle's article "Leaning Out: How
Michelle Obama Became A Feminist Nightmare," in which Michelle Obama is critiqued for being "mom in chief"
and focusing on maternal issues that impact the country such as childhood obesity and nutrition in the public school
system rather than focusing on more pressing feminist issues. Obama is also critiqued as a feminist nightmare for
choosing to focus on her own family, "We got exactly what we were told we were going to get," Jennifer Lawless,
director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University, reminds me. "When the Obamas were
campaigning in 2008, the American people were informed that she was going to primarily be taking care of her
children" (qtd. in Cottle 1).

described as "the scene of Mami's courtroom" (130). Thus, although both scenes continue the image of the mother as virtuous (Laura is upset because her daughters are dappling with drugs and sex), this image of the virtuous mother is not synonymous with weakness, as is usually the case in white culture.[55] It is Laura's piety that instigates her action. In Kingsolver, as I discussed earlier, when Orleanna acts as a strong mother, she suddenly is cast as less virtuous;[56] Laura's portrayal, conversely, does not suggest that virtue and strength are antagonistic in a woman or mother.

While the two above scenes of maternal strength could be viewed as Laura ultimately submitting to patriarchy (she is strong in order to not anger or displease her husband), this is not consistently the case either. Laura exhibits agency as a mother regardless of whether it pleases or displeases Carlos if she feels it is in her daughters' best interest. For example, when Carlos is displeased with Fifi's marriage and does not speak to her even after she has a child, Laura stands up for her own wishes, "When the daughter's baby girl was born, his wife put her foot down. Let him carry his grudge to the grave, she was going out to…see her first grandchild." Once Carlos grudgingly comes along, he is "under the watchful eye of his wife" (32). Thus, whether Alvarez depicts Laura in the Dominican Republic or the United States, whether a mother of young or grown children, she shows her to have strength which surpasses her role as a traditional mother but does not require her to abandon her role as a wife.

---

[55] American studies scholar Catherine A. Brekus writes of colonial American culture (which was predominantly white and of which she says, "the ideology of domesticity was a middle-class construction that explicitly denigrated black and lower class women who worked outside of their homes") and comments on the connection between women being perceived as virtuous but also weak in noting that women were perceived as morally superior to men, being more connected with their emotions to foster virtue, but were weaker due to biological essentialism. "Although they still stressed women's weakness, they also began to elevate women as morally superior to men" (149).

[56] In "Strong Men and Virtuous Women," the title alone which suggests that strength and virtue do not exist synonymously, sociologists Dawn Ward and Jack Balswick claim that in American society, dominant sex role stereotypes cast women as "weak and submissive, dependent, domestic…" (46).

However, Laura is not solely presented as a strong, angelic mother figure. For, although positive, such a depiction would be unrealistic, supporting the mythology of a perfect mother that *marianismo* requires but which no actual woman can achieve. Laura is human and is at times overly emotional, "At the least provocation, she would burst out crying, lose her temper, or threaten to end up in Bellevue, the place she had learned, where crazy people were sent in this country" (169). This emotive expressiveness suggests that although Laura does provide support for the family, she also needs such support herself and is unable to constantly be caring for others without being nurtured herself. Furthermore, although there are times when Laura is depicted as virtuous, as in her stance against drugs and premarital sex, this is not always the case. She is also shown as "tipsy on champagne" and "not particularly religious" (44). Such characteristics reduce the image of a pious woman who never relaxes or veers from traditional protocol. "Religion is central to marriage and family life in the Latino culture," according to Linda Skogrand, specialist in family and human development; therefore Laura's willingness to relax her religious standards suggests that although she is influenced by social and cultural mores, she does not allow them to subsume her identity. Additionally, Alvarez humanizes Laura through showing her snobbery at times from having been born into money and having lived as an aristocrat on the island. Usually this comes out in Laura's comments and views regarding the hired help. Thus, Alvarez avoids the binary of presenting a mother as either an angel or a monster; she complicates a one-dimensional mother figure. Laura's positive and negative traits oscillate throughout the text, whereas Orleanna is at first a "good" mother but changes to a "bad" mother upon her failure to protect Ruth May.

Alvarez avoids dichotomously portraying mothers, yet importantly, Laura does not have a flawless relationship with her daughters. The primary issue in their relationship is that the girls

are embarrassed by their mother. Though they respect Laura, they fear that she will be misunderstood by the Americans, which in turn will reflect poorly on them. When in college, Yolanda dreads either of her parents coming to visit: "My own old world parents were still an embarrassment at parents' weekend… my mother in one of her outfits she bought especially to visit us at school, everything overly matched, patent leather purse and pumps that would go back, once she was home, to plastic storage bags in her closet" (98). When Yolanda gives poetry readings, her mother always attends, which bothers Yolanda since she realizes that grown women in the United States do not usually have their mothers closely interact with them in non-family settings, "Yolanda was so embarrassed that she tried to keep her readings a secret from her mother, but somehow the mother always found about them and appeared, first row, center. Even when she behaved herself, the mother threw her daughter off just by her presence" (46). The conflict is not actually instigated by Laura's actions but from the fact that she acts and looks differently than an American mother.

Most of the conflict between Laura and her daughters stems from issues associated with assimilation into a new culture and white culture's resistance to Latina immigrants rather than something inherently flawed in their relationship. Suzanna Danuta Walters, whose research centers on gender, family, and popular culture, admits,

> Much of the fiction of women of color avoids the perils of the repository narratives so prevalent in white women's fiction. If these white feminist representations of mothers and daughters have been characterized by their dichotomous framing (good versus evil mothers, etc.) with an emphasis on conflict, literary images produced by women of color have tended to be more nuanced, more complex, less starkly defined…mother-blame is

less the issue than is the role of the mother (or often the surrogate mother) as healer to the daughter wounded by the vagaries of racism. (170-1)[57]

Rather than Laura being the catalyst for much of her daughters' anxieties, it is American culture itself which serves as the antagonist. The girls need their mother to help navigate the challenges of acculturation. In her counseling practice, Herst notes differences between Western culture and non-white cultures like the Garcías, stating that in "families with strong ethnic or religious ties [,] Mother is still respected…Among families who have recently arrived…from Mexico, Central America, or Asia, mothers are regarded with affection and admiration, and Mother's name is proudly defended" (11). Herst suggests that as immigrants become more assimilated, they may adopt an American attitude that turns their attention away from parents and extended family. She hypothesizes, "Maybe second-generation immigrants are ashamed of their parents and want to distance themselves from their folks' quaint, unfashionable ways" (11). While this shame of parentage is problematic, it is a result of feelings of alienation from dominant culture rather than attitudes that are endorsed by their ethnic culture. In fact, when the García girls critique their mother, it is often due to a failure from white culture's perspective, suggesting that, from an objective standpoint, Laura is actually not failing as a mother. Alvarez writes, "Her daughters never called her *Mom* except when they wanted her to feel how much she had failed them in this country. She was a good enough Mami, fussing and scolding and giving advice, but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom" (136). Truly, Alvarez critiques the white 'American' mentality here and endorses the Hispanic model in which the mother acts

---

[57] I agree completely with Walter's interpretation. However, she makes this conclusion from analyzing popular media from WWII up until 1994, when her book was published. I seek to show how her thesis applies to literature and continues to be just as applicable twenty-three years later, suggesting, unfortunately, little has changed.

with agency. For any good parent realizes that the parental role requires the parent maintaining authority as opposed to simply being a friend.

When the girls negatively view their mother, it is often on account of either their or her Americanization or desire to assimilate. In a scene that occurs shortly after the family moves, Carla has been stalked by a sexual predator, and her mother has promised that she will narrate the incident to the police rather than Carla having to speak. However, after the police officer calls Laura a "responsible citizen" whom he knows will comply with his request to hear the account from Carla, she realizes her mother is not immune to wanting to be perceived as a good American: "Oh no, Carla groaned, now she was in for it. The magic words had been uttered. The Garcías were only legal residents, not citizens, but for the police to mistake Mami for a citizen was a compliment too great to spare a child discomfort" (160). Here, Carla feels betrayed or unprotected by her mother, who had "an apologetic look on her face" (160). However, none of the Garcías are insusceptible to the allure of wanting to fit in within U.S. culture. In another scene, it is this time one of the girls, Sandi, rather than Laura, who is influenced by the allure of the dominant culture. When the Garcías are taken out to eat by a wealthy American couple, Sandi sees her parents through American eyes and loses respect for them: "Tonight she felt beyond either of her parents: she could tell that they were small people compared to these Fannings" (184). Furthermore, Sandi probably views her mother as weak, incapable of dealing with the problems that arise in America, as the section references Laura's emotional outbursts. Sandi witnesses Mrs. Fanning's drunken flirtation with her father, which ends in a kiss she initiates and he cannot reject due to his financial obligation to her husband. Carlos asks Sandi to keep this humiliating and inappropriate encounter a secret from her mother, which she does, saying, "Not a word of this to your mother. You know how she is these days" (182). Sandi

recognizes that due to her parents' immigrant status, they are unimportant in the U.S., despite their past success in the Dominican Republic.

While in white culture, mother-daughter tensions are usually presented to be inevitable, when there is conflict within the relationship of women of color, there is usually some instigator. In "Engendering the Nation: The Mother/Daughter Plot in Cuban American Fiction" Adriana Méndez Rodenas, specialist in Latin American and Caribbean literature, analyzes the mother daughter relationship in Cuban-American fiction and concludes that it "shows that there is a major obstacle to full female development other than the failure of motherhood: the tortured course of Cuban politics, what mirrors the twisted destinies of the mother-daughter plot" (57). Alvarez's work explores Dominican politics rather than Cuban, showing that the stress of assimilation is tied to the family's need to first resist the dictator (though the entire family must feign allegiance when guards come to their house to investigate) and then uproot and relocate in order for Carlos to avoid capture and punishment. This major life-style change has ramifications on the mother-daughter relationship. Alvarez's work, similarly to Rodenas', highlights the fact that mother-daughter tensions are rooted in past political trauma and current assimilation anxiety rather than because an angst filled mother-daughter relationship is natural.

Despite the fact that, as has been shown above, issues of immigration and assimilation can inflame mother-daughter tensions, it is likely natural for the mother-daughter relationship to experience some strain, especially during the adolescent period. Women from all cultures will probably experience some conflict during this time due to the many changes that occur in adolescence as a girl matures into womanhood and develops her own sense of self.[58] Elements of human nature, such as a daughter's tendency to hold a grudge for what she considers a past

---

[58] Therapist Charney Herst admits, "The mothers and daughters I counsel come in every shape, age, and color" (8).

wrong from her mother, or vice versa, may transcend culture. However, white culture tends to exacerbate the conflict and present it as normal; thus, even girls from minority cultures which support the mother-daughter relationship can be negatively influenced and impacted by dominant culture's aversion to strong mother-daughter bonds. As sociologist Ruth Horowitz puts it regarding Chicanos, "Community culture is not immune to the allure of the culture of the wider society" (222). Exposure to dominant culture which endorses "the erroneous expectation that daughters will and should hate their mothers [which] has been practically raised to a cultural imperative," according to psychiatrist SuEllen Hamkins and family therapist Renee Schultz,[59] also impacts ethnic mother-daughter relationships (9). One conflict that the García girls experience with their mother, especially during their teen years, is disagreement over proper and improper conduct. They view their mother as prudish. In one example, the girls claim that Laura views any type of modernized feminine care or education as inappropriate,

> Carla was on [in trouble] for experimenting with hair removal cream, (Mami threw a fit, saying that once you got started on that road, there was no stopping…She made it sound like drinking or drugs.)
>
> Yoyo was on for bringing a book into the house, *Our Bodies, Our Selves.* (Mami couldn't quite put her finger on what it was that bothered her about the book…there were no men in it…But there were women exploring 'what their bodies were all about' and a

---

[59] Similarly to Charney Herst's claim that mother-daughter duos of any ethnicity can experience conflict, SuEllen Hamkins and Renee Schultz also argue that the mother-daughter relationship can be tense during adolescence simply because adolescence is a tense time in general, due to enormous pressures which affect girls of all races: "[G]irls today are just as likely to experience anorexia, bulimia, sexual assault, depression, and abusive relationships now as they were ten or twenty years ago, and they are even more likely to experience suicidality, alcohol and drug abuse, and self-injury. While poverty and racism can exacerbate the effects of these problems, the problems are prevalent among teen girls of every race, ethnicity, and income level" (24). However, I believe it is important to analyze whether the girls of color are highly acculturated and living mostly according to principles of dominant white culture or whether they are rooted in communities of color and living according to countercultural principles of ethnic culture.

whole chapter on lesbians. Things, Mami said, examining the pictures, to be ashamed of.)

(110)

In another example of the girls' belief that their mother is too prudish, they feel their mother jumps to conclusions and does not understand the need for girls to experiment, such as when Laura finds their marijuana and, according to the girls, comes to imagine that her daughters are "all addicts, fallen women with married lovers and illegitimate babies on the way" (114). Laura is described by her daughters as overreacting, "She wore her tragic look of the Madonna with delinquent children" (115). Alvarez's inclusion of examples of conflict provides the reality of some struggle even in good mother-daughter relationships but also shows that as the girls become more Americanized, their relationship with their mother becomes more susceptible to misunderstanding and blame.

Although conflict may be present in mother-daughter relationships of all ethnicities, the extent of, motivation for, and implications of such conflicts can be strongly impacted by cultural ideologies. While Western culture interprets conflict as both resulting from and leading to negative implications, conflicts between mothers and daughters do not necessarily mean that daughters desire separation; appropriately dealing with conflict can help to strengthen a relationship. According to young adult literature scholar Hilary S. Crew, because white feminists interpret mother-daughter dynamics according to [white] male dominated psychological scripts, they interpret attachment to a mother as a negative dependency from which the daughter needs to achieve individuation, usually through conflict with her mother.[60] White feminists only view conflict between mother and daughter as proof of the daughter's need to escape her mother or as

---

[60] Crew notes, "[W]estern white feminist perspectives on adolescent mother-daughter relationships have…not generally addressed racial and cultural differences in their analyses of the relationship between adolescent daughters and their mothers" (Crew 82-3).

evidence that she is indeed seeking such an escape. However, that is not always the case.

Psychologist Terri Apter rejects division as a necessary or normal component of mother-daughter

relationships.[61] Apter contends that daughters fight with their mothers because they believe this

can cause their mother to see their perspective: "[T]he aim of the argument was never to

separate; it was always characterized by the underlying demand, 'See me as I am, and love me

for what I am'" (22). This idea that even disagreement can be a sign of relationship is reified by

feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan who suggests that "girls…must resist the values placed on

self-sufficiency and independence in North American culture" (10). Weingarten is another

theorist who resists the idea that children need to disconnect from their mothers.[62] She claims

that although "culture at large is promoting one developmental goal for adolescents: separation"

there is "confusion between separation and differentiation…Intimacy [between mother and child]

promotes differentiation" (22-23, 25). White culture views conflict in the mother-daughter bond

as evidence of a flawed mother as well as the unimportance of the relationship, but minority

cultures both recognize the inevitability and even usefulness of conflict and also seek to

overcome relationship barriers.

  Apter and Weingarten's interpretations of mother-daughter conflict are more

multicultural than most and work well with Alvarez's text. An example of a daughter desiring

time and attention from Laura occurs after Yolanda has a skirmish with her father. She craves

her mother's guidance and comfort, though she feels at first she must resist it, "'Go away,' Yoyo

wailed, but they both knew she was glad her mother was there, and needed only a moment's

---

[61] The fact that her research model was mixed rather than solely white undoubtedly impacts her theory, as she interviewed sixty-five mother-daughter pairs of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities in Britain and the United States.
[62] Weingarten focuses on the harmful effects on both boys and girls in being encouraged to separate from their mothers. While I agree that boys, like girls, are culturally pressured to disconnect, mother-son relationships are not my focus, so I am only applying Weingarten's comments to the mother-daughter relationship.

protest to save face" (148). Yolanda's desiring interaction with her mother shows that she trusts

her to both listen and to help her with her problem. Another example of the daughters craving

intimacy with their mother occurs when they complain about Laura having an outside interest

rather than just focusing on them. The girls are irritated that Laura sketches invention ideas. The

narrator states, "None of her daughters was very encouraging. They resented her spending time

on those dumb inventions. Here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they

needed help figuring out who they were…Important, crucial, final things, and here was their own

mother, who didn't have a second to help them puzzle any of this out…" (138). The girls'

criticisms are rooted in a desire for connection; they want attachment, not separation.[63] [64]

     As Laura's invention sketches indicate, she has interests outside of motherhood;

however, she is able to balance them alongside it. While Alvarez writes of the daughters'

perspective, reproof of Laura's nondomestic pursuits is not her goal. Ultimately, Laura's

example propels her daughters in their success: three of them "professional women…with

degrees on the wall" (28). Readers are told that Laura passes on her creativity to Yolanda, who

becomes a poet and teacher, developing her own agency as a result of her mother's

encouragement: "It was as if, after that, her mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad

and said, 'Okay, Cuquita, here's the buck. You give it a shot" (149). Alvarez shows how mother

---

[63] "We must assume instead that adolescents want to retain positive connection with their mothers and will appreciate it if the major institutions in their lives encourage rather than undermine these relationships" (Weingarten 34).

[64] I am not arguing that a mother should adhere to the model of only serving her family; that, as we have seen earlier, is reductive and problematic, reinforcing a narrow view of what it means to be a successful woman or mother. Rather, my focus in offering these examples is to demonstrate that in this scenario, the conflict between Laura and her daughters emerges because the daughters want closer ties with their mother rather than fewer. I would argue that such a reading should also be considered when reading *Poisonwood Bible;* however, in addressing authorial intent, the trope of mother-blame within the text makes it difficult to believe that Kingsolver believes that the girls want or need communion with their mother.

and daughter, rather than separating, are able to connect as Laura empowers Yoyo to find the courage to follow her own passion. Fifi, the daughter without a degree, is also influenced by Laura. Though a free spirit, she is not afraid to settle down and have a baby, having had a model of a strong mother herself and seeing that motherhood can be a part of a woman's life without subsuming it. Laura not only supportively visits the hospital to watch over the baby after Fifi gives birth but also insists that Carlos come, despite the anger he still feels toward Fifi, because Laura knows it will be good for the entire family and the new baby.[65] Laura also continues to view Fifi as a multifaceted person, rather than only a mother: "[S]he's the smart one, all right. And I don't mean book either! I mean smart" (58). All of the girls' paths as adults indicate a strong role model who has enabled them to succeed.

Indeed, when looking at the García women's relations, it becomes apparent that most of the time that Laura is criticized by her daughters it occurs in their girlhood. Once they reach adulthood, they appear to have a good relationship with their mother. Alvarez includes one main scenario of mother-conflict in the girls' adulthood, but even this receives full closure, as opposed to the lingering ambivalence present in many white portrayals. The narrator states, "The mother dressed them all alike in diminishing-sized, different color versions of what she wore" (40). While the narrator's statement in and of itself is not attached to a stigma, readers are soon made privy to the daughters' opinion on their mother's system once they reach adulthood,

> As women, the four girls criticized the mother's efficiency. The little one claimed that the whole color system smacked of an assembly-line mentality. The eldest, a child psychologist, admonished the mother in an autobiographical paper, 'I Was There Too,' by saying that the color system had weakened the four girl's identity differentiation

---

[65] Fifi acknowledges, "Mami dragged him here" (Alvarez 65).

abilities and made them forever unclear about personality boundaries. The eldest also

intimated that the mother was a mild anal retentive personality. (41)

If the readers are persuaded by the girls' criticisms, then such a passage humanizes Laura,

keeping her from being too perfect of a mother. However, Alvarez may have also intended for

the passage to be read with empathy toward Laura: if the daughters cannot even agree on the

effects of the color coding method, how seriously should their complaints be taken? This

showcasing of the naivety of the daughters' mother-blame is akin to what Kingsolver does.

Laura is shown sympathetically here, similarly to how Kingsolver shows Orleanna

sympathetically until Ruth May dies (though Laura has no 'falling from grace' event.)

Furthermore, the fact that Carla suggests that the girls are unable to differentiate between

themselves yet Carla and Fifi describe and perceive the very same experience differently seems

to suggest the opposite of the paper's thesis. Finally, the eldest daughter holding a successful,

professional job in which she makes such complaints is rather ironic, especially for a woman

from a traditional culture where a woman's place is often perceived to be within domesticity.

Laura has undoubtedly affected Carla, the psychologist, in positive ways even though she

criticizes her mother from that position.

Alvarez continues the anecdote about the color coding by saying the mother "knew when

she was being criticized. The next time the four girls were all together, she took the opportunity

of crying a little and saying that she had done the best she could by the four girls. All four girls

praised the good job the mother had done in raising four girls so close in age, and they poured

more wine into the mother's glass…" (42). This scene is strikingly different from reunion scenes

in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Alvarez's narrative suggests that the family gathers together often. At

least once a year the entire family congregates for the father's birthday, and more often than that

most of the time (24). Contrastingly, in Kingsolver's text, what is left of the family rarely reunite

after the women leave the Congo. Laura is able to remain close with her daughters once they

reach adulthood rather than having her daughters draw away. As scholar and dean of social work

Luis H. Zayas explains, "The *familism* associated with Hispanic cultures emphasizes family

loyalty, solidarity, cohesiveness, and parental authority…" (n.p.). Mothers in Latina cultures

spending ample amounts of time with their daughters seems to help foster understanding. In

"Don't Blame Mother: Then and Now," Caplan comments that adult women feel that they

should not spend large amounts of time with their mother. This, they seem to believe, is what

"achieving autonomy" means (239).[66] However, Hispanic culture, just as one example of a

minority culture's divergence from white cultural practices, believes the opposite. Due to

familism, Hispanic culture does not associate any negativity with mothers and daughters

spending time together even into the daughter's adulthood. Alvarez shows Laura interacting with

her adult daughters for special occasions such as birthdays and the birth of a child, moments of

crisis such as a daughter's institutionalization, and common place events such as an evening

dinner or a work event. Because they communicate often, Laura, rather than simply being judged

by her children, is given (and takes advantage of) the chance to speak for herself, to tell her own

story. Furthermore, because parental authority is valued in Hispanic culture,[67] daughters are

more trusting of their mother's actions, even if they do not understand them. Garcia-Rodriquez

and Rodriquez report that it is when respect diminishes that conflict escalates, "Latina mothers

reported more intense conflict with their daughters when they perceived that the daughters' level

---

[66] Though Caplan does not hedge her observations as most applicable to white culture, based on her demographic (Western culture), this is the case.
[67] Though Hispanic culture values parental authority more than U.S. white culture, which emphasizes individuality, this has most impact in the U.S. on the mother's relationship with her children. In white culture, due to patriarchy, fathers usually receive more respect than mothers, due to their gender status.

of respect was low" (75). Because respect is an important part of the girls' relationship with their mother, apparent in their praising "the good job the mother had done" as well as their remaining in close relationship with her, even when there is conflict, it is not intense (Alvarez 42). Other scenes also show that the daughters recognize Laura's authority and respect it: "Everyone listens to the mother" (67). Due to the high esteem they give their mother, the daughters even imitate her: "She [Yolanda] spoke in the voice she had learned from her mother when she wanted a second helping of the good things in life" (71). They recognize that their mother is an example of female agency.

One of the reasons that the García girls do not fall into mother-blame the way that is typical of white daughters may be that although Laura is the primary mother figure, she is not the only one who holds a maternal role in their lives. Horowitz describes Chicana female networks as sharing mothering responsibilities, "*Compadres*[68] and relatives usually make up an emotional and social support group. Women move freely back and forth between homes—cooking together, talking, taking care of one another's children…" (58). Contrasting white culture, Segura and Pierce state, "Many Chicana/o scholars have characterized the existence of multiple mothering figures as a distinctive feature of life in Chicana/o families. Yet this feature goes unnoticed in white feminist accounts of 'mother-centric' families…" (63). When living in the Dominican Republic, Laura constantly has nieces and nephews over at her house and her daughters are often over at their aunts' houses. Yolanda describes the arrangement as follows, "Back then, we all lived side by side in adjoining houses on a piece of property which belonged to my grandparents" (225). She reminisces, "We lived in each other's houses, staying for meals at whatever table we were closest to when dinner was put out, heading home only to take our

---

[68] Co-parents

baths and go to bed (or to get punished)" (226). Even after the move, this supportive mother

network continues as the daughters are sent every summer back to the Dominican Republic for

family time with aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.[69] The aunts mother the four daughters

right along with Laura, "Tia Carmen puts her arms around us. 'Don't forget, these are my girls

too'" (130). Laura is not the only authority figure, which means that when the other female

relatives mirror her discipline techniques or vice versa, the girls are able to see that others make

similar decisions to their mother. Laura's being able to rely on others to assist in her mothering

also releases the burden of caregiving as something that is solely on her shoulders, allowing her

to de-stress as well as receive parenting advice. When the girls are disobedient, they are

threatened with being sent back to the island to be closely watched by relatives, and Fifi actually

is sent back after Laura discovers she has been smoking marijuana. Yet, neither Fifi nor the other

girls perceive their mother as monstrous or bad for sharing the role of mothering with others for

a year. This is due to the cultural practice of families sharing parenting responsibilities:

"Extensive interaction across kin networks also enhances the opportunities for relatives other

than the mother to become involved in child rearing and providing child care as well as

emotional support" (Segura and Pierce 74).[70] This is quite different from white culture's

expectation of intensive mothering which must occur strictly from a biological mother.[71]

---

[69] Although Chicana culture does have a history of kin networks and although the García girls do receive "extended parenting" from relatives, one must acknowledge that many immigrant mothers experience extreme isolation upon entering the U.S. because they are used to such support networks and are suddenly without family and friends and have difficulty forming new relationships due to cultural and language barriers. Although Alvarez does not explore this in her text, it is likely that Laura would have experienced similar feelings. Fraktman says of immigrant mothers, "She is without community, thus support" (100). The García's economic position allows them to travel back to the island to interact with family and friends, but many immigrants do not have the funds for such travel.

[70] Anne R. Roschelle reports, similarly to Segura and Pierce, that there is "a definite tendency among Chicanos to rely on the immediate kinship network…" (39).

[71] Kingsolver heightens Orleanna's isolation from the typical white mother's by placing her in the Congo where she is literally the only white, English speaking mother. However, it is symbolic of the isolation that many white women experience even when mothering in the U.S., not because they are not surrounded by other mothers but because the expectation is that each mother should tend solely to her own family. Western culture in general does not adhere to communal mothering, which gender studies scholar Chris Bobel acknowledges, suggesting an alternative model, "If

By and large, the García women are represented as bonding together rather than allowing animosity and division to reside amongst them. Cultural studies feminist Kathleen Rowe Karlyn explains, "The matraphor[72] figures differently for young women of color than it does for young white women…For these daughters, the mother-daughter relation enhances the power of both rather than impedes their autonomy. This perspective offers an important contrast to the fraught mother-daughter relationship described in much white Third Wave discourse" (194). Like many texts written by women of color, Alvarez's work highlights the ways in which Laura positively assists in her daughters' growth to womanhood. Laura supports her daughters and their various endeavors and although at times this embarrasses them due to their integration into white culture, they ultimately feel loved by their mother and know that she is interested in their lives. White authored texts indicate that a mother's love is not enough to foster a positive mother-daughter relationship due to the mother's shortcomings, regardless of her love. However, texts by women of color such as Alvarez show that a mother and her love do not have to be perfect in order for a positive relationship to exist between mothers and daughters.

In looking at the conclusion of Alvarez's text, there is a very different tone than in Kingsolver's. Both texts carry a heaviness about the past, but Alvarez's interaction with the past does not indict the mother. Alvarez begins the story in the present, covering the girls' adolescence and adulthood in the U.S., and halfway through the novel travels back in time to cover the family's life on the island. Therefore, the ending is really the first chapter of the work in which Yolanda as an adult visits her extended family in the Dominican Republic and secretly

---

we genuinely create support networks that assist mothers—all mothers—so that the work they do is valued and shared in community, there is hope…" (76). The current dearth of communal mothering in white culture leads to mother-blame because the daughter views the mother alone as the primary female authority figure, often pitting the mother against the father and other women, who appear superior due to the non-maternal role they hold in the daughter's life. Such a heavy responsibility for one woman to bear will inevitably have negative ramifications. In chapter four, I will explore in greater detail the impact of communal mothering.

[72] Karlyn appears to be using the uncommon word "matraphor" synonymously with the concept of matrilineage.

debates whether to return to the U.S., as "[s]he believes she has never felt at home in the States, never" (12). Yolanda, as well as her sisters, has experienced her share of trials: she has been unsuccessful in her career, divorced, and left by the man who was cheating on his wife to be with her; Sandra has suffered from anorexia and experiences a breakdown for which she is institutionalized; Sofía has a strained relationship with her father after running off with a man (her eventual husband) by whom she gets pregnant, and Carla's first marriage ends after she becomes involved with and marries her analyst.

However, none of the now grown daughters ever indicate that their heartbreaks and challenges are their mother's fault. Neither does Laura ever feel responsible or guilty for her daughters' misfortunes. She sympathizes with them and attempts to help, but she does not assume culpability. Nor does Alvarez ever indicate that she should.[73] Scholar of Latino literature and culture William Luis argues in opposition to this, saying, "The unstable lives of the sisters are related in part to the control the mother and father exert over their children…the control the parents want to maintain over the daughters, an indication of Dominican culture, and the girls' need to rebel, a mark of North American society, results in cultural and personal conflicts" (842). While I agree with Luis that cultural conflicts do propel each of the girls' struggles, to state that the parents' need to control the daughter brings this on is a form of mother—and father—blame. The García girls' challenges, as indicated by the title, are caused by their losing their accents, by

---

[73] The student study website GradeSaver endorses a typical white culture lens of mother-blame regarding Laura, saying, "Her stories also reveal her own values and attitudes. As Laura narrates the development of Sandra's nervous breakdown to Dr. Tandlemann, she unknowingly conveys her own inability to understand her daughter's struggle, alerting the doctor and the reader to her inadvertent role in Sandra's troubles. Likewise, her sanitized version of Sofía's elopement suggests the rigid morality from which Sofía fled in the first place." However, not only does GradeSaver not provide any specific textual support for these claims, but as I have sought to prove, such an interpretation of Laura as culpable goes, though along with white culture, against much of Latina cultural ideology. GradeSaver is a useful example of how stereotypical ideas from dominant culture are made to fit a work of minority literature and are presented to impressionable students, many of whom visit these sorts of sites, as the 'correct' interpretation.

the struggles associated with the immigrant experience and the issues of acculturation and assimilation. The mother-daughter relationship is shown to be strained at times due to typical adolescent stages or the cultural shifts associated with second generation immigration, but ultimately the mother, rather than portrayed as culpable, is shown to be a much stronger and more humanlike figure than the image white authored texts produce.

In review, both Kingsolver and Alvarez write on mother-daughter relations, but the white relationship is not only more fraught with conflict than the Chicana relationship but the mother is overall portrayed as blameworthy and weak. This suggests that not all contemporary texts are moving past the issues of mother-blame and misunderstanding, likely due to mainstream culture's influence, for Weingarten says that "blaming mother is as American as apple pie" (20). This is not to say that there are not exceptions to the rule; however, I am identifying a trend. I am hopeful, however, that this motif can change once awareness and positive models in minority culture to combat such interactions are made widespread.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MORALLY INFERIOR WORKING MOTHER IN WHITE CULTURE

From the physical demands of maintaining a home to the emotional and psychological labor of being the primary caretaker of the traditional family, motherhood is already challenging. However, the added dimension of working outside the home makes it even more difficult, especially when white women believe that by blending work and motherhood, they are sidestepping their true calling. The trope of mother-blame that is so ingrained in white culture has many sources, but one of them is a suspicion and a stance of criticism toward mothers who decide to work. This attitude of misgiving and judgment around mothers who work outside of the home certainly contributes to a sense that working mothers are to blame for any difficulties that arise in their families, and especially with their daughters.

In the previous chapter, I argue that the cult of domesticity and the mother as the Angel in the House are two tropes that still structure expectations around motherhood. These ideas also relate to white culture's attitudes regarding working mothers. In this chapter, I will explore why white working mothers are often viewed by dominant culture as well as by themselves to be inferior to mothers who stay home, and I will illustrate through Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* how working mothers are equated with bad mothers. I will then contrast white culture's aversion to working mothers with Asian American culture's acceptance of them and explore how this positively impacts the mother-daughter relationship, as can be seen in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

Although women of color have been quite likely to both work and mother, white middle and upper class mothers have been expected to remain unemployed and entrenched in domesticity. However, such was not always the case in our nation's history. Sociologist Linda L

Lindsey explains, "Until the mid-nineteenth century, a frontier economy based on subsistence farming required women to carry a multitude of productive roles. In her role set, a woman's child-rearing function was less important for family survival than her farm and household-related money-raising activities…" (246). In frontier times, it would have been looked down upon for a mother only to raise the children. In *Motherhood and Representation*, humanities professor E. Ann Kaplan claims that white women were not always expected to separate themselves from the public realm of industry but that this shift emerged as modernism developed. She argues that it was an "economically necessary transition" in which "pre-modern mercantile-class wives and mothers" moved "out of their roles as producers in the old pre-industrial economy into that of consumers in the new middle-class home. This shift may be said to inaugurate the early modern mother in the modern nuclear family" (17). Before this shift, Adrienne Rich states, "A woman was rarely if ever alone with nothing but the needs of a child or children to see to" (47). Indeed, before the transition into an industrial economy, women were still centrally associated with domesticity, but they shared that space of labor with their husbands who worked from home. There were not public and private spheres separating men and women. Truly, the change of the industrial revolution did not so much move women into the home as it left them there as their husbands went away to work. Kim Anderson, a feminist focusing on issues of motherhood, states,

> This shift from family centered working environments, to one in which men worked away from the home and women were left to care for the household and children was accompanied by middle-class ideals of motherhood which posited the mother as the 'angel of the home.' In spite of the fact that few working-class mothers could afford to devote themselves exclusively to mothering…these ideals were upheld and have

underpinned North American ideologies of motherhood for the last two hundred years. (762)

Although there was never a time in which all women stayed home, as Anderson clarifies, housewifery was only possible for middle and upper-class women, who would have been most often white. Yet, this role has become mythologized as the norm and the model.

Contemporary culture is certainly impacted by the realities of working women, many of whom are mothers. Author and journalist Susan Maushart, who wrote the influential work *The Mask of Motherhood,* reports that "three quarters of all American mothers are currently in paid employment…" (171). However, the fact that most mothers work[74] does not lessen the stereotype of an inattentive, disengaged, or selfish mother, which is often associated with mothers' entrance into the labor force. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels review pop culture and argue that the media encourages a leeriness toward working mothers by reporting on horror stories occurring at daycares or with nannies, suggesting that if the mother had been home with her children instead of working, the catastrophe could have been avoided. In analyzing depictions of working mothers in sitcoms, they write, "Bad mothers wore fancy business suits (red ones were a dead giveaway of evil), carried briefcases" (Douglas and Michaels 223). Feminist and social critic Diane Eyer in *Motherguilt* explains, "When it comes to working outside the home, the baby gurus [T. Berry Brazelton, Penelope Leach, Benjamin Spock, etc.]…pontificate about the sinfulness of mothers who work" (4). Because white culture has a history of women as primary caregivers, mothers' participation in paid labor is often a source of mother-guilt, inflicted both internally as well as by society. To reinforce the prevalence of a

---

[74] According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics' "Working Mothers Issue Brief," "In March 2015, 75.3 percent of mothers with children under age 18 worked full-time" (4).

wariness of working mothers in white culture, I add psychologist Shari L. Thurer's claims, "The prevailing mythology does concede that some mothers have to work outside the home, but it classifies such an endeavor as a necessary evil. The really good mother is a full-time mother…The public does not warm to mothers who are otherwise engaged, especially when she doesn't have to be" (336).

Rich speaks of working women experiencing "anxiety, guilt, uncertainty" and goes on to say, "The image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers" (52). Of course, Rich does not mean to focus only on white culture, but she admits in her updated introduction to *Of Woman Born* that she essentially applied characteristics she observed in white culture to that of all races, eliding significant differences (xxiv-xxv.) Therefore, Rich's comments about working mothers feeling guilty should not be read as a universal truth but rather as a statement that specifically applies to white women. White men, according to Lindsey, have a significant role in maintaining cultural ambivalence toward working mothers, "Because a woman's earnings from paid employment alter the power relations within the family, men will evoke the motherhood mandate to ensure that women concentrate their energies on domestic roles" (246). However, women adhere to the myth just as much as men, regardless of the fact that it is self-defeating. Just as it is too simplistic to blame patriarchy on men, it is also too simplistic to blame stigmas associated with working mothers on men. Although they do not clearly couch it as such, Douglas and Michaels' description of the average working mother's feelings being "[t]orn…between our need to work, our deep love for our kids, and the escalating standards…" is actually most indicative of white culture, as is evidenced in all the examples they analyze (234). While Thurer does not specifically define this belief as a white ideology, she does acknowledge it as a Western ideology, which I argue is mostly influenced by

whiteness (334). Furthermore, she acknowledges that not all cultures adhere to the same beliefs: "Motherhood—the way we perform mother—is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols" (Thurer 334).

Perhaps because there is much angst in the dominant culture associated with combining motherhood and work, according to D'Vera Cohn, lead author of a recent Pew Research report, as of 2014, white women make up 51% of stay-at-home moms. This large percentage suggests that even in the twenty-first century, white women are influenced by public perception positing primary caregiving as the superior choice for mothers; also, many white families are financially secure enough for the mother to remain home (though this likely requires careful budgeting.) Cohn writes, "Americans… continue to think that having a mother (or parent) at home is best for a child. In the Pew survey, 60% of respondents said children are better off when a parent stays home to focus on the family, compared with 35% who said children are just as well off with working parents" (1). While Cohn's report avoids specifically reporting that the mother is the one who needs to stay home, it is typically the mother who stays home. In fact, there is reported ambivalence toward the father staying home, as is evidenced in ABC news' story by Emily Deruy "Americans Aren't That Comfortable With Stay-At-Home Dads."

Traditionally, religious white culture especially maintains the view of the necessity of a stay-at-home mother. Cohn reports, "Among white evangelical Protestants, 69% say it's better for children if a parent is at home to focus on the family" (4). The sense of "acquired moral superiority and cultural prestige" is attached to non-working mothers, according to feminist scholar Andrea O'Reilly (371-2); this may be associated with the connection between stay-at-home mothering and a faith based mandate about family structure. Bible verses such as 1 Timothy 5:14, "So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their

homes…" and Titus 2:4-5, "Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home" have been used as an argument for a mother not to seek employment outside of the home. While these same verses have relevance for ethnic religious communities, they are less likely to be interpreted as enforcing stay-at-home motherhood.

White evangelicals may endorse mothers staying home because they believe they are preserving a traditional value, though, as shown above, such is not historically the case pre-industrial revolution. An example of evangelical Protestantism's championing 'traditional' gender roles can be seen in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson's statement on why the college introduced a new major of homemaking which was available only to women, "We are moving against the tide in order to establish family and gender roles as described in God's word for the home and family… If we do not do something to salvage the future of the home, both our denomination and our nation will be destroyed." (*Associated Press* n.p.). Such a statement shows that although a high value is placed on homemaking, which typically largely consists of rearing children, a mother who veers from this path will likely experience guilt if she continues to associate with those holding such values. While little research has been done on *why* white evangelicals endorse mothers staying home to raise the children, there is consensus that this is often a shared value. Journalist Ken Fine argues that white evangelicals denounced Hillary Clinton in the 2017 election because they viewed her comments on having a career "as a slap in the face to stay-at-home mothers."[75]

---

[75] Sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox reports on findings from his research, "Sociologists Jennifer Glass and Jerry Jacobs have shown that women raised in evangelical Protestant families ... marry earlier, bear children earlier, and work less [outside the home] than other women in the United States" (42-3). Not all studies focusing on evangelical Protestants specify that the demographic is mostly white; however, this is usually the case.

Of those who stay home, most mothers are not staying home because they cannot find or keep work; rather, college educated (mostly white) women are leaving careers to stay home. Michaels and Douglas speak to this phenomenon of the late 1980s and early 1990s which they call the "mommy track": "[S]tory after story announced that for working mothers, career success—even working outside the home, for all that mattered—was not all it was cracked up to be, and mothers were allegedly retreating en masse to the domestic bliss of home" (204). Some examples of popular news stories documenting successful working mothers' return to the home are Lisa Belkin's 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article "The Opt-Out Revolution" and Claudia Wallis' 2004 *Time Magazine* article "The Case for Staying Home: Why More Young Moms Are Opting Out of the Rat Race." Such articles highlight the moral superiority of mothers making the decision to stay home.[76]

Sociology and gender studies scholar Sharon Hays says that American culture has created unachievable, high expectations for mothers in which both stay-at- home and working mothers fall short. I maintain that although, by and large, stay-at home mothers are lauded as making an appropriate sacrifice for their families, this is not to say that white culture properly values mothers within domesticity any more than they value women who pursue employment outside

---

[76] Although I will be primarily exploring white culture's negative perceptions of working mothers, that is not to say that stay-at-home mothers do not experience obstacles in their role. The "mommy wars," the term for the debate between stay-at-home and working mothers on the best choices regarding mothering and childcare, fuel animosity today between working mothers and non-working mothers, part of which is exaggerated but part of which is actual. An example of the way the mommy wars encourages division amongst mothers can be found in the summary for author Leslie Morgan Steiner's anthology *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families,* "With motherhood comes one of the toughest decisions of a woman's life: Stay at home or pursue a career? The dilemma not only divides mothers into hostile, defensive camps but pits individual mothers against themselves." Such language portrays intense emotions from judgmental women unwilling to accept that those who mother differently from themselves are making the correct choices. While the cover of the book quotes *Oprah Magazine* as saying of the book's collection of essays, "[A]mbition and attachment do battle," the real fight is not between mothers. We should be looking beyond mothers' decisions and beliefs to what has influenced them to begin with.

the home. Michaels and Douglas say something similar, "The ethos of intensive mothering has lower status in our culture ('stay-at-home mothers are boring'), but occupies a higher moral ground ('working mothers and neglectful')" (12). Thus, either choice a mother makes regarding work is devalued by contemporary white culture due to its problematic view of motherhood in general.

Although I am focusing on working mothers both because this is my own experience and because this is the trope that has stood out to me in my research of ways mothers are made culpable in literature, I recognize the validity of challenges that stay-at-home mothers face as well. It is not my desire to propel any type of conflict between mothers who make different choices regarding work and family life. I believe that if mother-blame is to ever be eradicated, then all kinds of choices made by mothers must be accepted and respected. Rather than women turning against one another, they should recognize that, as author Joan Williams argues, the current system both punishes women for performing as an ideal worker and devalues important family work (146). Although in this chapter I am primarily analyzing ways in which white culture punishes and villainizes working women, I recognize that stay-at-home mothers struggle in their own ways.

Blaming Working Mothers: Creating Culpability in Fitch's W*hite Oleander*

Due to the white American belief that stay-at-home mothers are best for the family and, consequently, society as a whole, it should come as little surprise that literature by white authors often collapses the image of the bad mother with that of the working mother.[77] Even in fictional texts, mainstream culture reifies an incompatibility with work and motherhood, evidence that

---

[77] Feminist Suzanne Juhasz addresses the racial dimension apparent within the negative perception of working mothers: "Particularly in middle-class white novels…work emblematizes self-identity in a way that frequently comes into conflict with the cultural ideology of motherhood" (410).

creative works reflect cultural ideologies. Janet Fitch's debut novel *White Oleander* (1999) tells the story of a white mother and daughter living in the present time whose relationship is rife with tension and dysfunction. Ingrid Magnussen is a single mother with talent and refined taste who lives near the poverty line. At the core of Ingrid's conflict with her daughter Astrid is the fact that Ingrid is convicted of killing her lover and serves nine years in prison before being acquitted, during which time her daughter Astrid suffers the abuses of the foster care system. While it is not indisputably established that Ingrid is guilty, most evidence points toward this, and Astrid, as the narrator, believes her mother to be culpable. As a murderer, Ingrid is certainly a flawed mother, not only having failed her daughter but having broken the laws of the land and violated a moral code. However, the way in which Fitch develops Ingrid into a monstrous mother plays on socially perceived flaws that have nothing to do with Ingrid's actual crime. Instead, Ingrid is most fully indicted for being a mother with other interests; she not only has a job, but also a struggling career and a consuming passion as a poet. She is condemned for being a working mother.[78]

Although Judith Stadtman Tucker, researcher and advocate for issues related to motherhood, says, "I believe that contemporary mothers—especially North American—are currently participating in reworking the script of motherhood…," texts like *White Oleander* suggest the opposite is true where white women are concerned (296). As Fitch's work became a national bestseller due largely to it being adopted by Oprah Winfrey's book club, culture at large seemed to be accepting of the ideological message the work advances without much reflection. Winfrey did little to bring any critical attention to these issues. In their chapter in *The Oprah*

---

[78] While I will be focusing solely on Fitch's text to exemplify white culture's wariness of working mothers due to their likelihood of being bad mothers, there are other works which could be used to prove the same point. Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Diablo Cody's screenplay of *Ricki and the Flash* are two additional examples of stories of flawed women whose shortcomings are connected with their status as working mothers.

Phenomenon, education professors Roberta F. Hammett and Audrey Dentith complain of Winfrey's moderating of the book club, "[T]he pedagogical approaches taken by Winfrey resulted in reinscription of conventional American beliefs and ideologies" (219). Winfrey focused only on rudimentary reading techniques. For example, Hammett and Dentith narrate a comment from Winfrey during the television episode discussing *White Oleander*: "And did most of you all know that that's the metaphor for Ingrid, that she's beautiful but toxic? I love when you figure that out" (211). There is no discussion on why Ingrid as a toxic character is given the status of a mother, specifically a working mother; there is no interrogation of Ingrid's toxicity with her role as a white mother. Winfrey's choice to include *White Oleander* aligns it with a line of books that, according to Hemmett and Dentith, are chosen due to the theme of a heroine overcoming obstacles, teaching readers a didactic lesson of resiliency (214). Yet, as I will argue, it is important to note that it is the mother and the wake of her influence that are the forces to be overcome in *White Oleander,* promoting the theme of mother-blame.

One may argue that as a black woman, Winfrey would have no need to deconstruct white ideologies in a white text about mothers and daughters, and, of course, it is not Winfrey's role to educate America. However, critiquing such beliefs in the text opens the door for conversations about how people of color have resisted the villainization of mothers and how mothers and daughters of color have found positive ways to interact with and support one another. Such frank dialogues regarding race as it intersects with motherhood could be especially influential since the majority of her viewership is white women, according to Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson (13).[79] Winfrey is an example of how contemporary culture overall skims over the important ideological issues represented in the text.

---

[79] See Linda Kay's article "My Mom and Oprah Winfrey: Her Appeal to White Women" for information on how and why Winfrey resonated so well with white women.

Eyer points out that although working mothers are conditioned by society to feel guilty, they are also expected to cope with the feelings: "…from *Parents* magazine to *Redbook*, unhappy working mothers are told they must now learn to manage their guilt about not being supermom…" (8). According to Jesse Bernard, a practicing sociologist, "Our way of institutionalizing motherhood breeds guilt into the very fabric of a woman's character. She blames herself for every deviation from the model…And the only way some can assuage their guilt is by constant dedication to the child" (qtd. in Maushart 34). In other words, mother-guilt is a consistent symptom induced by dominant culture's mores, and most white women seek to eradicate the guilt by committing more deeply to follow the prescribed script rather than veering from it. Ingrid, however, has no feelings of guilt to manage. In fact, one of her mantras advocates, "Never apologize, never explain," which seems to be antithetical to a guilt ridden mother (16). She regards herself as faultless in her mothering, which is nowhere more apparent than in the fact that Ingrid does not constantly dedicate herself to Astrid when she is with her to make up for the time she is away. Astrid even comments on Ingrid's lack of devotion to her, "So often when I was with her, she was unreachable" (8). In fact, the only time guilt is mentioned in the text is when Astrid recognizes that she inhibits her mother from living the life she would otherwise lead without a child. "I felt my guilt like a brand" (9). Ingrid, on the other hand, does not view herself as a failed mother or even view maternity as a large part of her identity.

Typically, mother-guilt is heavily associated with working mothers in Western white culture because these women break so many taboos, often which are never explicitly stated but are internalized nonetheless and manifest when women veer from the traditional model. In *White Oleander*, Ingrid is a monstrous mother because she does not feel the typical mother-guilt that white culture teaches any decent woman should experience when she mothers untraditionally.

Rather than drawing her identity from her relationship with her daughter, Ingrid is self-focused. For example, after returning from an evening out, Ingrid directs not only their conversation but also her body language toward herself, "She came home at two when the bars closed…She sat down next to me, handed me her brush, and I brushed her pale hair smooth…" (12). Rather than apologizing for being gone all day at work and then all evening for pleasure, Ingrid talks about her night and has her daughter care for her, rather than brushing Astrid's hair or asking about her day. Although society prefers for women to not work, if they do, they must prove that their time away from the children is well spent and make the most of the time they do spend with their children if they are to be deemed as acceptable. Ingrid, of course, does not do this. In an interview with editorial director Laura Miller, Fitch acknowledges Ingrid's inability to sacrifice for her child, "So motherhood's a dance between individual needs and the needs of your child. And Ingrid's failing is that she had a child but refused to dance with her. She refused to look at her at any point and say, "What does my child need here?" ("A Reading Group Guide" at the end of *White Oleander.)* While I am not arguing that Ingrid's narcissism is positive, the fact that such that such self-absorption is connected to a working mother is noteworthy. That Ingrid's untraditional mothering leads her to a series of reprehensible actions that land her in prison speaks to the author's internalization of white cultural messages about untraditional mothering.[80] Fitch uses the easy target of a working mother as a prime element of her character's flaw.

Ingrid goes against specific characteristics of contemporary, Western, patriarchal motherhood. Ironically, although Western contemporary culture also values individuality and

---

[80] Though I use the term untraditional mothering, as I have stated earlier, what today's culture perceives as a mother's traditional role is not actually the case: Maushart clarifies, "Motherhood can be, and almost always is, performed alongside other forms of work. Indeed, the practice of something called 'full-time motherhood'—in which a woman's sole responsibilities in communal life revolve exclusively around home and child—is an historical aberration of twentieth-century industrialized life" (xx). Postindustrial culture has redefined what a traditional mother's role actually was. However, for the sake of clarity and consistency with its current usage, I will use the term 'traditional woman' to mean a stay-at-home mother.

self-expression, which are other qualities that Ingrid possesses due to her untraditional mothering, her positing of autonomy above motherhood mores does not reflect positively on her. In her article "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood," O'Reilly attends to nuances particular to Western, specifically North American, ideology, although this needs to be further allocated to *white* Western North American ideology. O'Reilly's point is as follows:

> "[Co]ntemporary Western patriarchal motherhood may be characterized by eight characteristics or rules: (1) children can be properly cared for only by the biological mother; (2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; (3) the mother must always put her children's needs before her own; (4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; (5) the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; (6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children; (7) the mother has full responsibility but no power from which to mother; (8) mother-work, child rearing specifically, is regarded as a personal, private undertaking with no political import. (369)

O'Reilly's argument, as I will later prove, does not work well in being applied to North American women of color. Therefore, her target group must be acknowledged to actually be contemporary *white* Western patriarchal culture. However, once this modification is made, most of these characteristics or rules inherent in the Western (white) perception of a good mother conflict with a mother participating in the work force. When a mother works, she fails to be with her children at all times and relies on others to assist in the rearing of her children; she possibly fosters other interests if she perceives her work as more than just a way to pay the bills; she potentially has less energy for mothering due to her work responsibilities, and she believes she can be impactful in both the private and public spheres.

116

In analyzing how Ingrid goes against the eight characteristics of Western patriarchal motherhood O'Reilly identifies, the problem is mostly rooted within Ingrid's having a career, which is a catalyst from which Ingrid continues to show more extreme examples of dangerous interests beyond domesticity. Ingrid does not believe that children can only be properly cared for by their mother; she takes Astrid to a neighbor to be watched when she is a toddler. When Astrid is twelve years old, Ingrid brings Astrid to work with her at the magazine publisher, but this is not because she desires to be a primary caregiver or spend more time with her daughter; it is because she has failed to make other arrangements. While working mothers typically make provisions for child care, Fitch shows the slippery slope of Ingrid moving from having someone else watch her daughter to essentially having no one watch her daughter, as Ingrid and her co-workers mostly ignore Astrid, leaving her to amuse and care for herself. Astrid comments, "She never thought far enough ahead to put me in a Y program, and I never mentioned the possibility of summer school" (7). Due to her preoccupation with work as opposed to intentional parenting, Ingrid is portrayed negatively both when she leaves her daughter with a sitter and when she takes her with her to work.

Fitch portrays Ingrid's leaving Astrid with the sitter, Annie, as negative because she eventually does not return for her. She abandons her for a year. However, Fitch uses the concept of a mother leaving her child for work to snowball into the possibility of the mother becoming calloused enough to abandon her child. Ingrid does not believe that a mother must provide constant care, which is one of the eight rules governing white expectations of motherhood. Fitch creates a subtle rationale for how a mother could abandon her own child: she is already accustomed to doing so every day during working hours. Even after Ingrid returns to take responsibility for Astrid, she often leaves her alone in the evenings and on weekends while she

goes out to socialize, suggesting that despite Ingrid's regret for literally abandoning Astrid, she continues a series of mini abandonments that do not bother her because she is already used to being away from Astrid for long periods of time while she works. Ingrid's actions affect and scare Astrid, who admits, "I was afraid she would fly away, and I would end up alone" (11).

Western society's caveat for working mothers, which is that work can be a necessary evil if it is required to provide for the children, coincides best with the concept of a mother who has a job as opposed to a career. Sociologist Linda Lindsey explains, "Although all employed women have jobs, they do not necessarily have meaningful careers. Jobs interfere with family in a different way than careers. A career orientation is associated with men and women in the professions who have a high degree of commitment, personal sacrifice, and a planned development sequence (career path)" (325). The important belief that "good" mothers must always put their children's needs before their own and that mothers must be fully satisfied and completed in motherhood can come into conflict with a career, which is something often requiring more time and effort than "just a job." As sociologist Judith Hennessy explains, "[W]e have yet to overcome the legacy of work and family as separate and oppositional domains; women must be either devoted to work *or* devoted to children" (3). Hennessy clarifies the reason mothers with careers are viewed more negatively than mothers who simply have jobs, saying that "professional women in careers…are viewed as choosing work and placing self-fulfillment, status, and occupational success over the well-being of children…" (3). In her continuation of veering from the good mother pattern, Ingrid finds fulfillment in her career, which is where devotion is required.

Ingrid actually has both a job and a career. Her job is working at a magazine where she makes only eight dollars an hour, creating spreads of other writers' work rather than her own.

She detests the job, finding it unchallenging as well as a waste of her talent, "She hated the lousy job she had…" (5). When someone says of her place of employment, "It's way too nice a day to be stuck in that sweatshop," Ingrid immediately agrees (19). Interestingly, although Ingrid does work at the magazine simply to provide for her child, readers are in no way prompted to recognize the sacrifice Ingrid makes to work at a job she loathes to provide stability for her daughter. The way the narrative is constructed, all the sympathy goes toward Astrid who is made to feel like a nuisance by her mother. Astrid acknowledges, "I knew the only reason we were here was because of me. If it weren't for me, she wouldn't have to take jobs like this" (9). Later Astrid says, "She was a beautiful woman dragging a crippled foot and I was that foot. I was bricks sewn into the hem of her clothes, I was a steel dress" (10). Again, readers are encouraged to sympathize with Astrid over Ingrid, creating a lack of empathy for the mother which easily descends into mother-blame.

The job at the magazine does make Ingrid a working mother, but it is not her career. In fact, it is because it inhibits her career that she hates it. Ingrid's career is writing; she is a poet. She writes constantly at home, self-publishes, and gives poetry readings. As a writer, she cultivates an academic mind, reading and quoting great literature. After one of Ingrid's poetry readings, we hear, "'Ah, the writer's life,' she said ironically, as they handed me the crumpled fives and ones. But she loved these readings, the way she loved evenings with her writer friends, trashing famous poets over a drink or a joint, and hated them, the way she hated the lousy job she had at *Cinema Scene* magazine…" (5). Ingrid loves the poetry readings because of the subject matter, context, and anticipation of how they may help her become discovered as a writer. Unlike her job, with which Ingrid is only able to cope if she "forgot where she was, why she was there, where she'd been and would rather be," she only dislikes poetry readings because they

draw attention to how unknown she is, as evidenced through her limited sales (14). Yet, even displeasure regarding lack of fame and meager sales shows Ingrid has ambition to climb higher, which is a career mindset as opposed to one of simply holding down a job.

It is Ingrid's career *mindset* which solidifies her status as a bad mother: she aspires for a consuming career even before she has it. Ingrid's career mindset is something that she does not distance from her home life. When Ingrid is home with Astrid on the weekend, she continues to work, rather than devote herself to mothering: "All that weekend…she wrote poems and crumpled them up, threw them at the wastebasket" (22). She does the same during evenings home, "My mother knelt at her table, writing…while I lay on her bed" (22). Fitch portrays a mother who is unable to pull herself away from her artistic and career ambitions to be present with her daughter. The fact that Ingrid is not constantly attending to Astrid is presented negatively, as Astrid wanders around the apartment, waiting for her mother to notice her. Ingrid attempts to bring her career interests into her mothering, but the two do not blend. Fitch presents Ingrid as being more concerned about passing on her talent to her daughter than life lessons and values, "*I tried to teach you poetry, but you were always so obstinate. Why would you never learn anything from me?*" (416). Of course, Astrid learns much from Ingrid, but none of it has to do with poetry. In fact, Astrid seems to pull away from literary endeavors because she perceives them as things with which she must compete for her mother's attention. Ingrid's attempt to share her passion with Astrid could be read as an example of her trying to cultivate a relationship with her daughter, but the narrative does not invite readers to view the situation this way, instead emphasizing that Ingrid only wants to connect with Astrid when it regards a topic of significance to her, regardless of her daughter's interests.

Ingrid's artistic interests and aspirations place her too much in the life of the mind to succeed in the physicality of raising a child. Astrid views her need to be clothed as a burden for her mother, "I couldn't tell my mother I'd outgrown my shoes again" (10). Astrid also notes that Ingrid, "for whom a meal was a carton of yogurt or a can of sardines and soda crackers" does not prepare proper meals (24). Astrid makes her own meals or scrounges for them at events to which Ingrid takes her, "I threaded my way through the crowd to the hors d'oeuvres table, quickly loaded my purse with things I thought could stand a few hours unrefrigerated" (13). Furthermore, Ingrid does not provide an inviting home, as Astrid aligns herself with those who have "strange mothers with ice-blue eyes and apartments with ugly sparkles and dead leaves in the pool" (16). Neither does Ingrid properly decorate the apartment to make it warm and inviting: "He looked around at our big room, elegantly bare. 'Just move in?' She said nothing. We had lived there over a year" (23). In short, Ingrid lacks the homemaking touch, although she also prefers minimalism to capitalistic clutter.

In all the above examples, it is important to note that Ingrid does actually provide for Astrid, supplying food, clothing, and shelter. The main issue is not even that the situation is meager, which is often the case for many lower class working mothers. The primary issue is Ingrid's failure to nurture her daughter and lack of commitment to the centrality of domesticity in her life. While the reality is that most working mothers do so to provide a good life for their children, Fitch automatically connects Ingrid's absence to her own selfish desires. Ingrid is inattentive to Astrid because she is focused on her own burgeoning talent, not noticing her daughter's growth, not seeing a need to provide balanced meals, and not feeling the need to make their home an inviting oasis from the world. Hennessy maintains that "working mothers derive status as good mothers through their ability to provide for their children"; however, Ingrid only

provides for Astrid in minimal ways, and all her provisions are for the physical being rather than attending to Astrid's emotional needs as well (68).

Of course, there are additional elements to Ingrid that lend themselves to the total negative picture Fitch creates. Ingrid is also a single mother and is sexually uninhibited. These elements paired with stigmas ascribed to her as a working woman again suggest the slippery slope that a mother can find herself on when she works. A working woman is able to imagine herself unmarried because she has fostered the independence to know she can provide for herself and her children. According to a White House report, "More than 40 percent of mothers are now the sole or primary source of income for the household. This reflects …a rise of single mothers, 65 percent of whom participate in the labor force…" (Nine Facts 4).[81] Thus, the reality of single mothers, like that of working mothers, is indisputable. However, both continue to be negatively perceived because they go against white culture's adherence to the cult of domesticity. Jane Juffer, scholar of feminism, gender and sexuality studies, states that single mothers have indeed historically been marked with a stigma. However, she claims that this stigma is being erased due to the self-sufficiency that single mothers exhibit today. She goes so far as to argue that "single mothers are the new darlings of popular culture" (728). I would temper such statements, for while perceptions of single mothers may be slowly changing, there is still an associated history of negativity which continues to impact contemporary portrayals. Characters such as Ingrid, whose antagonistic presence in the story is closely tied to her role as a single working mother, continue to subtly serve as examples of flawed mothers. Robin Silbergleid, author of "'Oh

---

[81] This report was released in 2014, showing continued applicability for today. However, the Census Government report for 1999, the year Fitch's novel was published, which is entitled "Population Profile of the United States" indicates a similar finding in which, at that time, 34.3 percent of households were divorced mother only and 40.3 percent were never married mother households (24). The report also indicated that many mothers, both single and married, are working, resulting in more children being cared for a non-family member (24-25).

Baby!': Representations of Single Mothers in American Popular Culture," argues, "While images of mature single mothers have flooded television screens and magazine covers, complicating stereotypes of single mothers…the stories that we tell about SMCs [single mothers by choice] demonstrate continued cultural anxiety about the changing nature of the American family" (n.p.). Like Silbergleid, I believe that it is not enough to see depictions of single mothers in media but to analyze the tone of the depiction, for even a "darling of pop culture" can be portrayed as a negative character, rather than someone to be taken seriously. Furthermore, if only abandoned or widowed women are positively portrayed as single mothers, the image of a victim emerges as well as the continued stigmatization of single or divorced mothers who have decided to be independent of a male partner. Such a stigmatized single mother aids in the mother-blame Fitch connects with Ingrid's portrayal.

Attorney Parvin R Huda claims that there continues to be a strong negative stigma associated with single mothers, stating, "American society has branded single mothers as the cause of their own moral unfitness, their children's perceived maladjustment and, more crucially, of their families' impoverishment" (346). Huda claims that it is single mothers' connection to poverty and the need for welfare as well as the decision of many to reproduce out of wedlock that create this negative perception. According to academic Jacqueline Kirby, "Approximately 60 percent of U.S. children living in mother-only families are impoverished" (n.p.). A capitalistic society such as America expects both productivity and success from its members and perceives single mothers as failing in both areas. Fitch draws on these popular perceptions in her creation of Ingrid.[82] Ingrid is not only single but also poor; for her, "[e]ighty dollars was food money for

---

[82] Kirby's research on poor single mothers is from the late 80s into the mid-90s, and is directly applicable to the time in which Fitch wrote.

two weeks" (39).[83] A lack of resources aligns Ingrid with the camp of single mothers whom

readers are socialized to look down upon.[84] As Eyer says, "Unmarried mothers (at the moment,[85]

primarily just the poor ones) are perceived as a kind of social plague" (15).

To add to Ingrid's culpability, she has chosen her single status. She opts to raise Astrid

without assistance from her father, Klaus. Of their separation, Ingrid says, "I was tired of his

mediocrity, his excuses. I was making what little money we had, he was living off me, we had no

home anymore. I told him it was over" (423). Not only does she not seek child support from

Klaus but she is the one who ends the relationship. Thus, there is even less room for Ingrid to be

perceived sympathetically, as she has not been abandoned or widowed. She chooses to end the

relationship, and Fitch suggests that Ingrid's refusal to hold Klaus to his fatherly obligation,

monetarily and otherwise, causes Astrid to suffer. In fact, Ingrid tells Astrid, "Fathers are

irrelevant. Believe me, you're lucky" (26). Later, she claims sufficiency as a mother and

authority as a parent apart from a father's help, "You had no father. I'm your father. You sprang

full-blown from my forehead, like Athena" (85). She teaches, "Fatherhood is a sentimental myth,

like Valentine's Day," resisting not only Astrid's biological father but what she perceives as a

patriarchal institution (424). Such strong indictments of fathers ultimately work against the

valuing of a nuclear family, which is the situation in which a working mother receives the most

sympathy, as she has not abandoned all traditional values.

---

[83] These are meager resources indeed for California prices in 1999.

[84] As Silbergleid says, despite the presence of single mothers in contemporary entertainment, few positive ones are poor, "America's comfort with single maternity is not only limited but depends on ignoring the economic realities…" (n.p.). Economic realities like poverty are probably mostly overlooked in entertainment's portrayal of single mothers such as Lorelai on *Gilmore Girls* or Rachel on *Friends* because a depressed socioeconomic condition tends to make people less sympathetic, which is a necessity for the acceptance of single mothers.

[85] Eyer wrote this in 1996; thus, her present moment is only three years ahead of when Fitch wrote.

Fitch also portrays Ingrid's sexuality as something detrimental to her daughter. Her own example posits desire over commitment. She only stays with Klaus while they have an exuberant passion for one another; when that subsides, she moves on. Furthermore, as opposed to practicing discretion, she both brings lovers home for sex as well as leaves Astrid home alone so she can be with her lovers. She also exposes Astrid to sexual content by having frank conversations with her. Despite contemporary culture's embrace of uninhibited sexuality in many circumstances,[86] the same does not hold for mothers. As Juhasz claims only four years after Fitch's work was published, "Often in contemporary novels sexuality and work exist in counterpoint with the mothering activities of the woman who is a mother" (410). This is especially true of white culture, which adheres to Angel in the House standards of motherhood, of which sexual purity is paramount.

Feminist family therapist Marianne Walters comments, "Seldom do we encounter in literature, film, or the popular media, mothers whose sexuality is explored and treated as part of the womanness they bring into motherhood" (43). Good mothers are presented femininely but asexually. Walters goes on to claim that due to culture's complicated and sexist expectations of female sexuality, it is no "[s]mall wonder that a mother's messages to her daughter about sex are mixed. Empowering her daughter sexually can be dangerous; cautioning her will be inhibiting" (44). In applying Walter's comments on poor representations of mothers who transmit positive messages about sex to their daughters, rather than Ingrid appropriately teaching Astrid about the pleasures of sex when used safely and responsibly, she embodies the character Walters identifies in which the sexuality the mother passes onto her daughter is dangerous. Early on, Astrid

---

[86] The culture in the 90s (the time in which Fitch wrote and set her novel) was quite similar to the belief that many people today hold regarding sexual liberation. Columnist Kristine Fellizar writes, "The '90s were a time when women's sexuality got a major push" (n.p.)

admires her mother's sexual prowess. After Ingrid dismisses a man after their sexual encounter in the apartment where Astrid lies in the other room, waiting "for him to leave," Astrid imagines herself following in her mother's footsteps, "Someday I would have lovers and write a poem after" (6). However, when Astrid does become sexually active, one could argue that it is to her own detriment, scarring her emotionally and making it difficult for her to engage in healthy relationships with males. Astrid's sexual dysfunction as a teen could be traced back to her childhood overexposure to sexual content from her mother.[87]

Perhaps the height of Ingrid's poor integration of sexuality with her mothering occurs when she becomes involved with Barry, the man she will eventually kill after he breaks her heart. In this relationship, Ingrid goes so far as to lay in bed with Barry in Astrid's presence, which Fitch suggests to be post coital. Astrid says, "They would even talk to me, her head cradled on his arm, the room full of the scent of their lovemaking" (25). Also, Ingrid leaves Astrid in the car while she goes inside Barry's house and makes love. Due to the devastation Astrid watches Ingrid experience over the loss of her lover, she "vowed she would never fall in love," though she does not plan to abstain from sexual relations. (30). Thus, Ingrid's example is one that endorses only casual sex to her daughter. While there is a long history of single mothers and openly sexual mothers being negatively perceived, in *White Oleander*, these traditionally negative qualities are juxtaposed alongside a working, career-oriented woman in order to create the perfectly flawed mother. Fitch's combining sexual liberty with a career-focused mother encourages the concept that once tradition is breached in one area, it becomes a pattern. Fitch

---

[87] Astrid engages in affairs with two different men, both of whom are boyfriends of her foster mothers', and engages in oral sex with a strange boy at a park as payment for drugs. She also becomes friends with a high class prostitute/mistress to whom she looks as a role model.

draws on all the preconceived notions white culture has about bad mothers to create an antagonist readers love to hate.

In blending well established negatively viewed traits of motherhood along with that of a working mother, Fitch's choice to have Ingrid incarcerated is important. Ingrid is convicted by the beginning of chapter four, so readers are still getting to know her when her character is besmeared by her crime, causing an even more unsavory image than has already been created thus far by her failings as a working mother. Hennessy claims that good mothers "model responsibility and demonstrate character" (68). Yet, even before committing a crime, Ingrid fails to model responsibility and character in traditional ways. Astrid criticizes, "She didn't believe in anything but herself, no higher law, no morality" (73). Because Ingrid is a poor example to Astrid, it is in keeping with her character to advance from one who commits immoralities (regarding self-absorption and sexual promiscuity) especially where motherhood is concerned, to one who comments illegalities.

The events leading up to Ingrid's crime center around a love relationship gone awry. Although Ingrid initially resists Barry's advances, she eventually becomes obsessed with him as their relationship progresses, and when he decides to stop seeing her, she goes into severe depression. The text indicates that Ingrid poisons Barry with oleander, which she mixes with an illegal substance. While Fitch never confirms Ingrid's crime, the following scene offers strong indication,

> I lay down in my bed and she covered me with a sheet, stroked my face, "Mom, what happened to that stuff from Mexico?"
>
> She just kept smiling, but her eyes told me everything.
>
> "Don't do it," I said.

She kissed me and stroked my hair with her cool hand, always cool, despite the heat,

despite the wind and the fires, and then she was gone. (41)

Shortly after this scene, Ingrid is arrested and convicted of murder. Any chance of readers

sympathizing with Ingrid dissipates as the story unfolds in such a way that Ingrid's self-

centeredness, as evidenced by her career mentality, culminates into her ability to prioritize

revenge over her child's well-being. According to Cynthia Garcí Coll, professor of education,

psychology and pediatrics, an imprisoned mother is automatically a bad one, "It is implicitly

assumed that by choosing crime, they have chosen to abandon their children" (263). However, of

their situation and its repercussions, Coll reports that "most mothers feel intense guilt and

shame," which suggest that they maintain morals and values rather than accepting a bad mother

identity (259). Ingrid does not express any such feelings of guilt or shame, furthering her status

as a bad mother: "*I regret NOTHING. No woman with any self-respect would have done less*"

(74). However, incarcerated mothers also "express fears of not being able to regain respect and

authority from their children and of being rejected by them" (Coll 259). The fact that Ingrid

writes Astrid in prison shows she tries to maintain a relationship, perhaps fearing that prison will

sever the minimal bond they have or possibly recognizing that she has no one besides Astrid with

whom to correspond. However, Astrid views the letters as a way for Ingrid to maintain control

over her, as opposed to a way to help their relationship. Thus, overall, Ingrid's incarceration and

her interactions with Astrid while there, both through letters and Astrid's prison visits, function

as another way of reinforcing her culpability. Her declaration, "Prison agrees with me…There's

no hypocrisy here. Kill or be killed, and everybody knows it" correlates the harshness of prison

with her own persona (65).

Fitch's text advances the mother-blame and mother-daughter tension that theorists like Rich have pointed out and critiqued. Although Rich stated forty years ago that "it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course," this is yet to be realized in white culture (225). Though it is a contemporary novel, like so many other works written by white women about white mothers, *White Oleander* does not redeem the mother-daughter relationship from white culture's typical trajectory or show the union as one of positive reciprocity. Readers are encouraged to adopt Astrid's very negative view of her mother. At first Astrid views her mother as "strange" but idolizes her, mostly due to the attention she craves (16). Yet, even when Astrid admires her mother, Fitch constructs a negative tone in which readers are meant to interpret Astrid's perception of her mother as naïve and incorrect. Astrid says things like, "I wanted to curl up in her lap, I wanted to disappear into her body, I wanted to be one of her eyelashes, or a blood vessel in her thigh, a mole on her neck" (66). Such comments show Astrid's desire to connect with and imitate her mother, but the overall narrative suggests that Astrid is attention starved due to Ingrid's life and choices and only desires Ingrid because she has no one else. Essentially, Astrid starts off placing Ingrid on an impossibly high pedestal that no woman could maintain. Astrid idolizes Ingrid but not for maternal qualities. Rather, she sees her mother as a perfect person, a perfect woman aside from maternity and traditional components of motherhood. Astrid focuses on her mother's attractiveness, "Her beauty was like the edge of a very sharp knife" (3); "Beauty was my mother's law, her religion. You could do anything you wanted, as long as you were beautiful, as long as you did things beautifully. If you weren't, you just didn't exist" (12-3). She also focuses on her mother's independence, "[O]nce my mother took a position, she never wavered from it" (17); "She whispered to me…, 'Don't cry. We're not like that'" (65). However, though beauty

and independence are perceived by many as positive traits, they are not characteristics that tie Ingrid to maternity; thus, even Astrid's initial positive perception of Ingrid is not based upon her being a good mother.

Once Ingrid is incarcerated and finally shows interest in Astrid, Ingrid's aloofness slowly begins to change. First Astrid simply acknowledges the change: 'She never wanted to know about me before" (68). But, the longer she is apart from her mother, the more she suffers due to the separation, and the more life experience she accumulates. Astrid comes to see her mother critically: "She doesn't want me to be happy…If I were happy, I wouldn't need her" (240). Finally, she comes to loathe her mother: "I didn't want anything more to do with her" (303); "I liked that idea, my mother behind the fence, handcuffed. She couldn't hurt me from there" (340); "I was supposed to forgive her now, but it was too late" (428). Because Astrid narrates the story, we are only given the daughter's point of view. While in *Textual Mothers, Maternal Texts*, O'Reilly and Podnieks claim that there has been a "shift from the daughter-centric stories that have dominated the maternal tradition to the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades as the mother's voice moved from silence to speech," this daughter-centric story format is typical in white literature (Wilfrid Laurier University Press book summary of *Textual Mothers*). Fitch's work continues a pattern of focusing on the daughter's viewpoint, which often villainizes the mother. The closest readers get to receiving Ingrid's perspective is the letters she writes to Astrid from prison. However, they do not create a more flattering portrayal of her. Though Ingrid does begin taking an interest in Astrid and many of the letters contain advice, Ingrid is portrayed as a power hungry mother, unwilling to relinquish her control.

Coinciding with the theme of mother-blame is mother obsession. Though Astrid eventually wants nothing to do with her mother, she can't escape her either: "*I am your home*, she'd once said, and it was still true" (345); "I hated my mother but I craved her" (346); "My blood whispered her name" (442). Though Astrid knows their relationship is rife with tension and has no hope of repairing it, she cannot stop thinking of her mother. Victoria Secunda, author of *When You and Your Mother Can't Be Friends: Resolving the Most Complicated Relationship of Your Life*, writes, "For a daughter to withdraw entirely from her mother is to reject her role model, her mentor, her template; love-hate is the natural order of things—we can separate, but only so far…On some level, rejecting Mama feels like shooting yourself in the foot" (4). Though Secunda's acceptance that the mother-daughter relationship will always be a love-hate mentality shows her adherence to white ideology, her comment that daughters have so much difficulty separating themselves completely from their mothers because it is a separation from themselves is sound and aids in understanding Astrid's difficulty leaving her mother behind.

Mother-Blame regarding Surrogate Mothers

While Ingrid is the primary mother figure, as Astrid's biological mother, Fitch skillfully weaves many other mother figures into the narrative via Astrid's movement through the foster care system. Astrid has five different foster mothers and through them Fitch returns to the themes related to working mothers that she has explored through Ingrid. Foster care creates an interesting dynamic because a foster mother straddles the line between the public and the private spheres. Fostering children is public in the sense that it is a way for women to give back to the community, interact with government policy, and reach beyond the nuclear family. In "Mothers for 'Hire': Why Do Women Foster?," sociologist Baukje Miedema draws attention to the line straddling public and private spheres as she highlights that foster mothers are hired, approved by

the state for the position, although mothering itself is unwaged work. Miedema says, "This role is shaped by their belief in mothering and carried out within a framework of provincial rules and regulations. Foster mothers are often sandwiched by the demands of the foster child, the demands of their own family members and the demands of the state. These demands not only bring conflict, but are characterized by paradoxes and contradictions" (307). Some of the demands of the state that support my rationale for viewing foster mothers as working mothers are the accountability the mothers must provide and the supervision they undergo, both to become licensed as foster mothers and to remain practicing. Miedema confirms, "Foster mothers are scrutinized and investigated by the official representatives of the state to be certified 'good' mothers…" (311). Foster mothers are working mothers due to the accountability they must provide and the skill set they must enact.

Just as the mother is of primary importance in supporting the nuclear family, the foster mother is equally responsible regarding the foster family. Psychologists Robert B. Hampson and Joseph B. Tavormina report on the importance of the mother figure in their study "Feedback from the Experts: A Study of Foster Mothers,"

> The mother was the central figure in the foster family, and Fanshel identified two types
> of foster mothers. The first included those women who were more oriented toward
> obtaining private gratification from their role—that is, from mothering—and who tended
> to keep only infants and young children. The second type consisted of mothers who
> reported social gratification as a more salient reason for becoming a foster parent ("I'm
> doing a good thing for someone") and preferred to keep older children. (108)

Essentially, Hampson and Tavormina report on foster mothers who are private or publically motivated. Both types of motives correlate to reasons why women work outside the home. The

privately motivated women work for self-fulfillment and a sense of purpose, similarly to why many women pursue careers. Miedema reports, "For many of the women interviewed, fostering gave them a sense of self-worth and increased their self-esteem. They were appreciated and admired for the difficult job of fostering" (312). The publically driven type of foster mother Hampson and Tavormina report upon is also similar to a working mother in that both feel a sense of civic duty and perceive their job as means of contributing to society. However, the main way that fostering differs from a typical job a mother holds is the lack of a salary. Although foster parents receive compensation to cover the cost of caring for the foster child/children, the system is not designed to pay foster parents for their actual service of caring for a foster child. If foster parents make money, it is either because they budget extremely well or they abuse the system.

While the foster mothers in *White Oleander* are all very different, ranging in background, socioeconomic status, and parenting techniques, they all share important similarities tied to the theme of failed mothers. In one home, Astrid is abused through starvation, while in others she is forced to engage in domestic and manual labor. Even the seemingly ideal foster mother fails Astrid by committing suicide while she is home alone with her. The foster mothers are flawed themselves, having various character deficient. However, they are also flawed in failing to properly mother Astrid and keep her from harm. They do not properly monitor her, as she engages in negative behavior due to exposure to drugs, alcohol, and sex while in most of their care. They fail to protect her and properly direct her to avoid damaging influences and experiences. Discounting emotional damage and focusing only on the physical, Astrid suffers greatly. She is shot by one foster mother, gets a serious dog bite while living with another, and stops menstruating due to malnutrition with another. Astrid views her physical hurts as proof of her internal state, "Beauty was deceptive. I would rather wear my pain, my ugliness…I was a

strip mine, and they would have to look. I hoped I made them sick" (176). The mother-blame which permeates representations of Ingrid continues with the foster mothers, showing how Fitch has internalized society's indictment of mothers, biological or otherwise. It is not only the biological mother's fault for losing her child/children that is indicated in the text, but also the foster mothers' failure to properly fill the biological mother's responsibilities.

Just as Fitch presents Ingrid completely from Astrid's perspective, which prevents readers from forming any sympathy toward the mother, so too are the foster mothers only presented from Astrid's daughter-centric viewpoint. Fitch's refusal to view these women as anything but antagonists to their 'daughter' reinforces white culture's view that mothers exist primarily in relation to their children. If readers desire for Ingrid and the foster mothers to be better mothers, to be empowered in that role, it is, ultimately, so that Astrid's life, in association with theirs, will be better. O'Reilly questions that belief, stating, "Why can we not simply demand that motherhood be made better for mothers themselves" rather than having the demands "only responded to when they are seen as benefiting the children?" (369). One might surmise that the issues facing Ingrid and the foster mothers are much more deeply rooted than their association with maternity and employment, but Fitch provides no personal stories for the women. She keeps them as tropes of working mothers as she enhances these women's negativities—ranging from jealousy of Astrid's youth and beauty to an expectation of Astrid to fix their problems, to a drive for material wealth—by juxtaposing their failures with the superior and idolized role of motherhood.

Creating culpable mothers by representing the role of the foster mother as a variation of the working mother is an effective technique for Fitch, as foster mothers, in general, are not positively viewed by society. Readers probably accept such portrayals because they align with

their perceptions of abusive foster parenting that is often highlighted in the media (Miedema 304). Though there are certainly challenges involved in fostering and while there is some corruption within the foster care system, Fitch again capitalizes on prevailing stereotypes to create flawed mother figures. In her work *Pink Collar Workers*, Louise Kapp Howe, an author who specializes in social issues, reports on a government study in 1975 that rated the difficulty of women's work according to complexity. In general, jobs held by women received bewilderingly low ratings. The foster mother job received a rating of 878, which according to the used scale, suggests simplicity. This rating is undoubtedly connected to the 1975 description of a foster mother's work, which was quite idealistically portrayed. "[She] rears children in her own home as members of family. Oversees activities, regulating diet, recreation, rest periods, and sleeping time. Instructs children in good personal health and habits. Bathes, dresses and undresses young children. Washes and irons clothing. Accompanies children on outings and walks. Takes disciplinary action when children misbehave" (qtd in Howe 237). Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick says of the report, "The description in the study of a foster mother's work captures those days when nothing much goes wrong and intense feelings are kept in check." She then goes on to note, "If maternal work were as easy at this contemptuous description of it suggests, anyone could do it" (33). Similarly to when this report was published, today there are still relatively few studies on foster care in the context of mothering, suggesting that it continues to be an overlooked topic. Culture devalues maternal work but is also wary of working mothers, thus placing foster mother work in a doubly deprecating bind. Fitch villainizes the foster mothers in her text by not only highlighting their failures but also by avoiding any description of the challenges involved in raising children, and she certainly does not address the specific challenges of raising foster children, who are often from troubled homes.

In reviewing Astrid's litany of mothers, the trope of mother-blame certainly indicts Ingrid as the biological mother, but to a lesser degree, all the foster mothers are shown to be culpable.[88] They all function together to serve as a myriad of possible ways in which mothers can fail their daughters. All the mothers have some connection to the public sphere and exhibit components of a working mother which Fitch uses to drive her point home. Fitch concludes the text with Astrid attempting to come to terms with her experiences and to make sense of her life and how she has been shaped by her various mothers.

> All my mothers. Like guests at a fairy-tale christening, they had bestowed their gifts on me. They were mine now…Claire's tenderness and faith. If not for Marvel, how would I have penetrated the mysteries of the American family?...Rena stole my pride but gave me back something more, taught me to salvage, glean from the wreckage what could be remade and resold./I carried all of them, sculpted by every hand I'd passed through. Carelessly, or lovingly, it didn't matter. Amelia Ramos, that skunk-streaked bitch, taught me to stand up for myself, beat on the bars until I got what I needed. Starr tried to kill me, but also bought me my first high heels, made me entertain the possibility of God. Who would I give up now? (437)

While each foster mother is somewhat reclaimed, Ingrid alone remains completely unredeemed.

Interestingly, Ingrid is the one mother who may have the most potential for Astrid and readers to reexamine. While the entire narrative centers on the assumption that Ingrid poisons her lover Barry with oleander, the text never confirms this. Ingrid is drugged during the initial trial,

---

[88] Fitch portrays the foster mothers as culpable regardless of the fact that there is a foster father present in several of the homes. Thus, in foster care, as in the nuclear family at large, the responsibility of childcare and blame for anything that goes awry rests on the mother. "Child welfare agencies and media reports use the term foster and family to acknowledge that foster care is considered a family responsibility. However, in reality, it is the foster mother who does the day-to-day caring. This is referred to as 'gendered care'" (Miedema 304).

prohibiting her from properly aiding in her own defense. Her exoneration after nine years of imprisonment is presented as another of Ingrid's malignant deeds, and her own daughter assumes Ingrid's defense is a lie, "They'd taken the defense that Barry had committed suicide and made it look like murder. I was appalled that it worked" (439). That Astrid never entertains her mother's innocence, regardless of her mother's and the lawyer's insistence of Ingrid's wrongful conviction, shows the extent of mother-blame in the text. Of course, Astrid does witness her mother boiling down oleander leaves and purchasing DMSO, which allows substances to travel through the skin into the bloodstream. But she never witnesses a crime, never considers that her mother has a change of heart and that, ironically, Barry meets his end even without Ingrid's help. The defense attorney's claim that Barry's autopsy is inclusive and that, as an overweight drug user, he could have died of heart failure, also has no effect on Astrid. Readers are invited to mirror Astrid's rejection of the possibility of Ingrid's innocence. In her book review of *White Oleander,* journalist Helen Benedict notes, "At no point do we root for this remorseless mother- in fact, Fitch makes us sympathize with Astrid's fantasies of revenge against her" (41).

The way Fitch accomplishes such a non-commiserate regard for Ingrid is not by causing readers to hate Ingrid for being a potential murderer but rather for being a horrible mother. None of the possibilities of Ingrid's innocence as a killer ultimately matter because, at the root, it is not her role as a murderess that makes her such a flawed character; it is her failure as a mother which begins manifesting itself long before the murder, which she may or may not have committed. Fitch acknowledges that Astrid ultimately hates her mother not for the murder but for the bad parenting. Ingrid's lawyer highlights the situation: "'I want you to ask yourself, what's she guilty of?...Really. Murder, or being a lousy mother?" (392). She goes on to say, "You've led six difficult years, and like a child, you point to the almighty mother. It's her fault. The idea that she

137

too is a victim would never occur to you" (393). Fitch may be attempting, for the only time, to point out Astrid's high expectations of Ingrid and the difficulty a mother has in living up to her daughter's standards. This may be an attempt on Fitch's part to portray Ingrid sympathetically. However, while the truth in the lawyer's statement speaks volumes, Astrid perceives the comment as proof of the corruption of the system, of defenders saying whatever is necessary to acquit their clients, and as the heroine, readers are most likely to adopt Astrid's viewpoint.

Although additional "bad mother" elements such as being single, sexual, poor, and incarcerated work together to completely villainize Ingrid, her status as a working mother remains important, as at the end of the novel, she is exonerated of her crime and her career blossoms. Ingrid has corresponded with academics and students alike while in prison and now has a following; her poetry has been widely published, and she has become a "jailhouse Plath" (358). She says of her imprisonment, "And if I had to be wrongly imprisoned to be noticed by *Harper's*, well…you could almost say it was worth it" (357). This statement suggests that although Ingrid does not choose to be separated from her daughter in prison, she may have made the choice had she known how much the sacrifice would advance her career. She recognizes that "I had to go to prison to get noticed" (431). Due to the publicity of the trial and the discovery of her talent, Ingrid finally will have "my choice of teaching positions" (Fitch 430). The acquisition of a collegiate teaching position relates to Ingrid's having a career rather than only holding a job. It will open doors for the connections she needs for her poetry to be widely read and published, which has been her ultimate pursuit. The culmination of the novel presents Ingrid's professional success, but it coincides with her losing her daughter due to her poor mothering. The message seems very close to the cultural ideology that professional success for mothers can only come at the price of private loss. "The old belief was that kids of working moms will suffer emotionally

because their mom works," says executive leadership coach Shannon Cassidy, although she goes on to say the opposite is actually true (qtd. in Levin-Epstein). Other sorts of private loss theorists have argued include a severed relationship with the mother and child due to the child's maladjustment and misbehavior, which is triggered by the mother's schedule.[89]

O'Reilly explains, "'Good' mothers in patriarchal motherhood…are defined as white, middle-class, married, stay-at-home moms" (370). Though white, Ingrid contradicts this good mother combination because she is poor, single, and employed. The status of a working mother is often interpreted as a focus away from the children, and Fitch certainly plays off of this perception. Ingrid focuses on herself in order to cultivate her art. This career mentality results in her making defensive statements such as, "If evil means to be self-motivated, to be the center of one's own universe, to live on one's own terms, then every artist, every thinker, every original mind, is evil" (74). While the ability to be self-motivated can be a source of strength, especially for a woman, Fitch stigmatizes the statement by having Ingrid accept herself as evil rather than simply ambitious and focused. Ingrid's justification for her inward focus is her work, which ultimately blends her flaws as a mother with her role as a career-oriented mother. Though research suggests that working mothers can positively impact their children and that mothers can still perform their parenting role well while working,[90] Ingrid falls into only the most stereotypical of working mother roles, that of the narcissistic, neglectful parent. Because she has her own ambitions, Astrid says of Ingrid, "My mother was not in the least bit curious about me" (11). Fitch constructs a completely self-absorbed mother by employing the white culture trope of the selfish working mother.

---

[89] Michael Rutter provides some historical context for working mother blame, tracing myths of working mothers damaging their children back to beliefs advocated in the 1950s in his article "Parent-Child Separation: The Psychological Effects on the Children."

[90] See Claire Cain Miller's "Mounting Evidence of Advantages for Children of Working Mothers."

In the end, it is not Ingrid's love as a mother which falls short but rather her ability to successfully perform traditional motherhood, which ties into her role as a single, working mother who places her burgeoning career above spending quality time with her daughter. Astrid admits, "No matter how much she had damaged me or how flawed she was, how violently mistaken, my mother loved me, unquestionably" (440). This passage can be interpreted as an accession that a mother's decision to work and ambitiously pursue goals unrelated to family life do not mean the mother does not love her children; however, it does make her "flawed" and "mistaken." Ingrid is the only one of her 'mothers' whom Astrid can conclusively state loves her, but with her birth mother she is unwilling to go so far as to say that her mother positively impacted her in any way. Ingrid models how to avoid conformity, appreciate beauty, and make the most of all situations. Ingrid introduces Astrid to the life of the mind and the world of the arts, which unquestioningly impacts Astrid's own career path as a visual artist. She writes to Astrid, *"You were an artist's daughter. You had beauty and wonder, you received genius with your toddler's applesauce, with your goodnight kiss"* (366). Though Astrid acknowledges the life lessons that came from her foster mother who was an attempted murderer and the one who starved her, she concedes no positive influences from Ingrid.

The novel's trope of mother blame, mirroring white culture's conceptions, goes so far as to suggest that even repentance is futile for failed mothers. Ingrid says, "If I could take it all back, I would, Astrid…You've got to believe me" and proves the validity of her statement by refusing to ask Astrid to testify on her behalf at the retrial, even though her daughter's testimony would be beneficial, as she was the person at the time with the closest contact with her mother (431). Yet, at the end of the story, readers are led to cheer for Astrid, a fighter who is strong enough to resist the temptation of returning to her mother and living as a professor's daughter. In

140

rejecting her mother, she denounces the prestigious working mother role Ingrid has finally achieved, "[He]r letters boasted offers lined up—Amherst, Stanford, Smith, I imagined myself a professor's daughter…" (438). Although Ingrid can now amply provide for Astrid, "I could wear a camel's hair coat at last, have a roommate, play intramural volleyball, all paid for in advance," the price for Ingrid's professional success has been her relationship with her daughter (438). Astrid shows growth as a person, learning from her past and creating a future for herself that is different from it, while Ingrid is perceived as being the same manipulative person she has always been.

In imagining scenarios of how her mother will celebrate her freedom, none of which include an attempt for reconciliation with her, Astrid thinks, "It was too much to imagine her tempering her joy with a moment of grief, a moment for the knowledge of what her triumph had cost. I couldn't expect that of her" (440). In this moment, Astrid abandons blaming Ingrid but only because she finally accepts that Ingrid can never mother well. Readers perceive Ingrid as a manipulator, capable of wrongly achieving freedom. Professor Laura Callahan, one of the only academics to address Fitch's work, argues that the novel "feeds an anti-feminist perspective that argues for the incompatibility of artistic freedom, gender equality, and healthy parenting" (495). Ingrid's character, according to Callahan, is not only problematic for its depiction of motherhood but also for its patriarchal agenda in general. Callahan goes on to say, "The anti-feminist strain in the novel becomes most clearly realized in this moment as all alternatives to bourgeois family structures, ideologies, and moralities are lumped in with the forces incorrectly leading a sociopathic murderer to be released from jail and installed on a college campus to exploit young minds even further" (515). Ingrid's success outside of motherhood and domesticity in gaining fame in writing and a collegiate level teaching appointment is explained through her villainous

actions. Callahan only identifies middle-class ideologies as working against female agency. However, as I have been striving to show, despite the progress women generally have made, mothers are still devalued and negatively portrayed because the forces influencing such negative portrayals are, contrary, to Callahan's assumption, more than economically charged; they are ideologies of white culture, encompassing gender roles, social class, and racial hierarchies.

The threat Ingrid personifies as a working mother at the beginning of the text becomes even more ominous near the end. Astrid has given up her claim as Ingrid's daughter, but Ingrid is now an intellectual mother: *"I have a following—I call them my children"* (358). In her master's thesis, Jaime L. Kelsky also identifies Ingrid's surrogate mother role. She says, "Ingrid is a role-model and mother-figure at a distance for other young women even if she fails to be one for Astrid" (22). The theme of mother-blame and negative mothering coinciding with working mothers winds throughout the entirety of the narrative. Even after Ingrid is estranged from her only daughter, Fitch continues to connect Ingrid with maternity, refusing to see her separate from a mothering role, even though her part changes not only due to her only daughter having grown to adulthood but also because Astrid's removes herself from Ingrid. Rich claims that the role of mother "is not an identity for all time" for a woman. (37). Yet, she asks, "[I]n the eyes of society, once having been mothers, what are we if not always mothers?" (Rich 37). Rich's point is not that a woman actually ceases to be a mother once her children are grown but rather that her role greatly changes in comparison to those intense years of mothering young and growing children. Fitch seems unwilling to acknowledge the way a mother's role does and should change throughout her life. Thus, she continues to only identify Ingrid as a mother of impressionable children in need of guidance, even when the children change from Astrid to college students.

142

Ingrid's career allows her to continue to damage young people, again showing Fitch's collapsing a negative mother figure with a working woman.

Though Fitch explores a myriad of mothers, all fall short. At the end of the book, readers are left wondering if a successful mother is even possible. According to Douglas and Michaels, the new momism is the current ideology which permeates white, middle-class, nuclear family culture.[91] They lament that "the new momism insists that if you [mothers] want to do anything else, you'd better prove first that you'd a doting, totally involved mother before proceeding…The only recourse for women who want careers or do anything else besides stay home with the kids all day, is to prove that they can 'do it all'" (22). Douglas and Michaels claim that the new momism is "becoming more hostile to mothers who work" (23). According to this belief, today, enlightened women choose to stay home not because they cannot work or are forced to stay home but because they choose to stay home, realizing that this is the superior choice.

Fitch endorses ideologies that could be argued to be in keeping with the new momism by creating Ingrid (the antithesis of these ideologies) to be "a monster."[92] While Ingrid is poor at the novel's opening and cannot choose to be a stay-at-home mom, she certainly chooses to pursue her career as a poet, writing constantly at home, fraternizing with other writers and giving poetry readings when she could be spending time with Astrid. Furthermore, Ingrid's choosing to live without a husband, although men find her attractive and she could easily secure a husband to support her, can be viewed in some ways as her choosing to work. Not only Ingrid falls short

---

[91] I also applied the new momism to ways that Kingsolver has been influenced by mother-blame in her construction of *The Poisonwood Bible*. Additionally, I addressed Douglas and Michaels earlier in this chapter regarding their statements on culture being more accepting of mothers working part time than full time.

[92] In "A Reading Group Guide" at the end of *White Oleander,* Fitch says of Ingrid, "I like Ingrid. I understand her. She's a monster. She has tremendous flaws, but tremendous intelligence and wit and she expresses a certain unspoken desire of many people. We're nicer than that, we care more about people than that, but I think it's understandable on some level."

according to the standards of the new momism, however. As has been stated, the text is bereft of any successful mothers. Fitch does present the concept of a successful mother, but it is only an image of a fantastical woman. While Astrid stays with one of her foster sisters who is in the hospital giving birth, she is astounded that all the women and girls in the maternity ward call out for their mothers during their time of greatest need. However, Astrid rationalizes,

> But then I realized, they didn't mean their own mothers. Not those weak women, those victims. Drug addicts, shopaholics, cookie bakers. They didn't mean the women who let them down, who failed to help them into womanhood…They wanted the real mother, the blood mother, the great womb, mother of a fierce compassion, a woman large enough to hold all the pain, to carry it away. What we needed was someone who bled, someone deep and rich as a field, a wide-hipped mother, awesome, immense, women like huge soft couches, mothers coursing with blood, mothers big enough, wide enough, for us to hide in, to sink down to the bottom of, mothers who would breathe for us when we could not breathe anymore, who would fight for us, who would kill for us, die for us. (403-404)

While the passage is hauntingly beautiful in its diction, its message is equally haunting in its errors. The passage sings of a mother who is flawless. Of course no such flesh and blood woman exists. Fitch alludes to a concept of the mother as an archetype, as almost a part of seminal psychologist Carl Jung's collective unconscious. Jung says, "The concept of the Great Mother…embraces widely varying types of mother-goddess" (75). The danger of such a concept is that no earthly woman should be expected to compete with the status of an immortal, goddess mother. If the ideologies of the Angel in the House and the cult of true womanhood place women on a pedestal that is impossible to maintain, the ideology of a Great Mother who must somehow

be actualized in one's own earthly mother and mother figures sets up a pedestal that no mother, biological or otherwise, can possibly even inhabit for a period of time.

Unsurprisingly, Jung identifies countless negative states that develop due to the Mother-Complex which arises from the Great Mother archetype.[93] The ills of the individual are blamed on his/her mother's improper rearing. Though mothers' roles are given much clout, overall, such psychological explanations are unhelpful to women, specifically mothers who are usually pointed to as the guilty party. Interestingly, Ingrid points out her failure to live up to such an image: "Imagine how unprepared I was to be the mother of a small child. The demand for the enactment of the archetype. The selfless eternal feminine. It couldn't have been more foreign" (426). Yet, because Ingrid is the villain, the validity of her point that society does indeed expect an enactment of a great mother archetype goes unexamined. Had a more temperate woman made such a claim, perhaps Astrid, and consequently readers, would entertain the possibility of the truthfulness of the statement.

The concept which Ingrid critiques, but Fitch ultimately glorifies, is of a perfect mother, which reinforces my claim that the text promotes a white ideology. Fitch uses the terms "the real mother, the blood mother" which suggests Jung's collective unconscious interpretation of the Great Mother[94] (437). Ingrid's reference to an archetype certainly connects. But, Fitch's potential reference to a psychological interpretation of the mother figure aligns her with a white ideology, for psychology has been critiqued for overlooking racial and cultural implications. Cynthia Burack, who researches in the areas of feminist political theory and political psychology,

---

[93] See Jung's 1969 *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,* which is Part 1 of Volume 9 in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Specifically see the chapter "The Mother-Complex."

[94] Regarding motherhood as an archetype, Naomi Lowinsky says, "We mothers are seen as all-powerful in psychology, but are personally disempowered. Our subjective experience is unknown and devalued. Yet we suffer the collective wound of being seen as the perpetrators of all suffering" (230).

emphatically claims, "Race and racism appear and disappear throughout the psychoanalytic corpus" (35). She also says, "It is not surprising that members of many marginal groups approach psychoanalysis with distrust or disinterest. Those who have suffered under regimes of psychological treatment or whose identities have been ignored, demeaned, or pathologized locate themselves in opposition to the knowledge/ power of psychological interpretation" (Burack 10). Jung's collective unconscious, like many psychological concepts, maintains that all people internalize elements similarly regardless of race or culture. Thus, the archetypal mother figure should be carefully approached as one that is very likely a white construct.[95] Rich references the "dangerous archetype" of "the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal…the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness..." (52). Certainly the idea of a mother as a powerful being, a goddess, etc. exists in many cultures. However, in mythologies beyond North America, such mothers are powerful but imperfect.[96] Only Western white culture maintains the belief in a great mother who should be flawless. Fitch specifies that the Real Mother must not be a normal woman such as a "cookie baker" (403). Furthermore, she cannot have ever failed her children: "They didn't mean the women who let them down" (403). Yet, realistically speaking, what mother has not or will not let her child down in some way or another; more broadly speaking, what person can ever keep from failing another?

---

[95] "According to Joan Griscom, most white feminist psychologists have foregrounded their similarities with black women in an attempt to affirm sisterhood 'without first fully recognizing and understanding difference'" (Abbey and Harris 263). While Abbey and Harris focus specifically on differences between white and black culture, their point is valid regarding differences between dominant white culture and any minority culture, which in many ways defines itself in opposition to what is mainstream.

[96] The Hindu goddess Kali is a gentle mother but savage warrior and often negatively viewed as the goddess of death; the Greek goddess Persephone is a devoted mother who goes to the underworld to get her daughter Demeter back but is unable to keep Demeter from being stolen by Hades in the first place and unable to free her permanently.

Acceptance of Asian Working Mothers in Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

While Ingrid's role as a working mother is quite common in contemporary culture and has been for poor women historically, Fitch's linking of a working mother with a failed mother is indicative of both the historical and current perception, beginning with the cult of domesticity and extending to today's continued mother-guilt. Women of color may be less likely to be blamed or blame themselves for not being their children's primary caregiver because such constant attention has not been historically possible due to factors such as oppression and poverty. Sociologist Dawn Dow explains that "mothers from other racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds have never been encouraged to embrace these frameworks and instead have actively created and reproduced different beliefs and practices related to motherhood" ("Black Moms and 'White Motherhood Society'" 6). While women of all cultures undoubtedly experience self-doubt in regard to mothering for a variety of reasons, theories of motherhood often present all working mothers as riddled with guilt as opposed to analyzing cultural expectations which might impact the mother's perception of herself as a worker. As Patricia Hill Collins, a social theorist whose scholarship examines issues regarding race, gender, social class, sexuality and/or nation argues, "Since work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for women of color, examining racial ethnic women's experiences reveals how these two spheres actually are interwoven" ("Shifting the Center" 46).

Amy Tan's text *The Kitchen God's Wife* is an example of a text by a minority female writer that explores the mother-daughter relationship coinciding with the mother working outside of the home.[97] Both *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1992) and *White Oleander* (1999) were published in the same decade, and both texts feature a working mother and focus primarily on one mother-

---

[97] Another text written by an Asian American author that has much bearing on these topics is Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts* (1976).

daughter relationship. Although I focus on Asian American family dynamics, there are large implications for the acceptability of working mothers in many cultures. I have chosen to analyze Asian American culture in this chapter because too little scholarship exists on its differences from white culture. Judy Yung, professor of women and Asian American history, addresses this lack, saying, "The growing scholarship on women of color is beginning to correct these incomplete approaches [which overlook gender and race] by looking simultaneously at race, class, and gender in explaining women's oppression and diverse life histories, but these studies often focus strictly on black-white race relations, ignoring other racial groups such as Asian American women" (5). I seek to contribute to the growing body of work that examines the particularities of Asian American culture and experience, in this case around the issue of how working mothers are regarded in the culture and represented in literature.

Chinese[98] culture is similar to white culture in that, traditionally speaking, the mother has been a domestic figure who does not work. Reporting on traditional Asian culture, sociologist Esther Ngan-Ling Chow says that the father is the "breadwinner and decision maker and mother [is] a compliant wife and homemaker" (286). However, historically, the home life in the two cultures is quite different. Pearl Buck, a white American author who was raised in China by missionary parents and lived over forty years there, focuses on variances between the two cultures and specifically analyzes gender roles in her work *Of Men and Women* (1941). In contrast to white culture, Chinese families have not historically followed the model of a mother raising her children alone. Instead, multigenerational families in which the mother-in laws and daughter(s)/ daughter(s)-in law reside in the home to manage the family are typical. Lindsey confirms, "Asian cultures demonstrate collectivistic kinship traditions…Extended families are

---

[98] While many of my observations will relate to Asian culture in general, I will specify Chinese culture more precisely when applicable because this is the culture about which Tan specifically writes.

normative…" (261). Such family networks are quite common in many cultures, though white

society seldom adheres to such arrangements unless out of financial necessity and then usually

for as short a period of time as possible. Although current Asian American families do not

necessarily include extended families within one residence, this history in Asian culture has

impacted contemporary views on working mothers in which other caregivers besides the mother

help raise the children.[99] Thus, Asian American culture is one that is still heavily influenced by

traditional Chinese values, even as they blend with American ones.

In understanding why working mothers are more respected in Asian American culture

than in U.S. white culture, it is important to note that Asian culture in general has a history of

revering the place of women and the potential for agency within motherhood. Even before

women were accepted as having contributions to make within the public sphere, China respected

women's roles within domesticity. Buck claims that a Chinese woman's role as a stay-at-home

wife and mother is one that demands more cultural reverence than is received in the U.S. She

asserts that "in China the home is the bulwark of Chinese national life and the center of Chinese

civilization" (38). In contrast, white American culture has traditionally expected women to

remain within domesticity but has denied the home a place of authority. Dennis Bloodworth,

who records the historical and current situation regarding Chinese life and customs, refutes the

myths of passivity and lack of ambition for Chinese women and suggests that due to their limited

opportunities, Chinese women learned how to make the most of their situations,

> Docile, demure, modestly silent, and deferential as a guest accompanying her husband to
>
> the houses of others, she knew how to use every weapon she could lay her hands on in

---

[99] In looking at Asian American families, many of them have only recently immigrated to the United States and carry with them traditional Chinese customs. According to the Pew Research Center as of 2012, "Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Asian-American adults were born abroad" ("The Rise of Asian Americans" 1).

order to remain mistress in her own home. If her husband was infatuated with her, she might sell her favors for greater powers. If he was a fool, she would start keeping his accounts, then advise, then manage him. (98)

While such manipulated subjectivity pales in light of true freedom, Chinese women found it better than no freedom at all. Buck claims, "Long before modern China gave to women complete equality, woman in China was man's superior" (30). The historical equivalent of traditional Chinese women in white culture is the Cult of True Womanhood, which Eyer describes as follows:

Women were persuaded that their femininity was contingent upon their being 'the angel of the hearth' who exemplifies the Christian virtues for her children. Women were suddenly discovered to be altruistic, tender, and intuitive; men were now rational, competitive, and self-interested./Historians refer to this new role for women as the 'Cult of True Womanhood,' for domestic motherhood became a sacred ideal fashioned by an absolute flood of propaganda." (Eyer 39)

However, as a whole, white women did not discover how to use their place within the home to gain authority with their husbands or society. Although white culture tends to view itself as progressive compared to Eastern gender roles, such is not the case concerning agency in motherhood. Asian American history and literature scholar Wendy Ho teaches, "Contrary to Eurocentric imperialist representations, Chinese and Chinese American women have maintained a level of power in their families as well as in their social, cultural, and political affiliations" (34). One of the central ways that women possess power in the family is through the mother role. When daughters recognize that society views their mother's role positively and consequently do the same, they are more likely to seek interaction rather than separation with their mother, seeing

the possibilities within identification. Because white women have not had such heritages of sociably valued mother strength, many white women have felt powerless within the home. Perhaps due to this overall lack of agency, white mothers' entering the work force is often perceived as a political and even ideological statement of autonomy, especially if the woman's work is nonessential to the survival of her family. The woman is making a declaration about desiring participation in public life. Because women's roles within the home have already been perceived as "the bulwark of national life" (Buck 38) in Chinese culture and because, according to Yale's Gale Billingsley, even within domesticity "there were Chinese women who wielded great power and influence," perhaps women entering the work force has been seen as less ideologically loaded in Asian American culture (n.p.). Working mothers in Asian culture continues women's roles in a new capacity but does not reinvent their worth or potential in general. It is also important to note that in its more recent history, China has pushed toward having women in the workforce. Lindsey explains, "China's goal to increase women's employment is linked to the argument that when women gain economically, they also gain in the family" (172). Thus, while during the 1950s the U.S. strongly endorsed the housewife image, China supported working women. This ideology is one which would have influenced recent immigrants.

Although Tan's readers can benefit from having knowledge of Chinese culture and especially gender mores in order to see the ways in which its ideologies may have influenced her portrayals of women and the mother-daughter relationship, this is not to say that Tan's purpose is a didactic one in which she tried to reach a specific audience and further an agenda such as how to restore female familial relations. Tan's ideal reader is a matter of speculation. It appears that she both wants to educate white readers on Asian culture and to provide Asian Americans with a

sounding board for their own experiences. However, though she has been well received by the white public, critics do not always view this acceptance positively. In her essay "Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects," Tan complains of the accusations associated with ethnic writers gaining a white audience, "If your work is inaccessible to white readers, that is proof that it is authentic. If it is read by white people, then that is proof that the work is a fake, a sellout…" (7). Tan says, "I write for myself," rather than targeting any specific audience (5). However, according to Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, scholar of Chinese American literature, *The Kitchen God's Wife* appeals to white women. Wong acknowledges, "The white feminist reading public appears to have an unusually keen appetite for mother-daughter stories by and about people of color" (52). Yet, Wong also recognizes that both Asian American and white audiences have been influenced by Tan. She says, "Even if there had been no white buyers, there would still have been a readership…among Asian American women, many of whom are hungry for validation of their own experiences as daughters of immigrant mothers" (53-4).

I would argue that, to an extent, women of all colors read Tan's work for similar reasons: they are drawn to and even empowered by the idea of a strong and/or renewed mother-daughter relationship, though for white women this may not be their own experience. However, Wong argues that the white woman's draw to what she calls "American matrilineal discourse" is driven by "ideological needs by the white-dominated readership…for the Other's presence as both mirror and differentiator" (52). Wong maintains that Tan, though not necessarily consciously, feeds white people's interest in Asian culture by providing details that are not necessary to the plot line but rather exist in order to allow white readers a kind of voyeurism into Asian culture, deriving pleasure from the foreignness of, specifically, the mother (70). This would suggest that the Asian American culture in the text exists not for the sake of authenticity but instead largely

as a marketing tool, enticing audiences' interest in exotic others. This reading suggests that the

mother-daughter relationship is simply a means to an end: the culture clash of an American

daughter and Chinese mother rather than the point of the story.[100] I, in contrast, see the ethnic

culture as central to why the mother-daughter relationship functions as it does within the text.

Wong is essentially grappling with why Tan's fiction has, as she puts it, "so

conspicuously eclipsed works by Euro-American writers on similar subject matter, as Kingston's

The Woman Warrior did over a decade ago" (52). I grant that exotic Othering[101] has long been a

problem of the white gaze. Whites are often fascinated by heritages removed from the mores of

Anglo Saxon culture. In *Black Looks,* bell hooks claims, "[E]thnicity becomes spice, seasoning

that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). Wong's point that white

culture is drawn to the exotic, perhaps in a spirit of voyeurism, is important to address. However,

I am hesitant to agree with Wong that this is the primary reason white women are drawn to Tan's

text or any minority text with a strong emphasis on a positive mother-daughter relationship. I

would argue that there is no white equivalent to what Tan has done with both *The Joy Luck Club*

and *The Kitchen God's Wife* and what Kingston has done with *The Woman Warrior.* In order to

make her comparison between white and Asian American texts about the mother-daughter

relationship, Wong essentially conflates them, suggesting that the stories are basically the same

regardless of the author and literary characters' race. The difference simply lies in the ways that

---

[100] Perhaps recognizing the appeal of exoticism, Fitch attempts to render Astrid and Ingrid some type of ethnic heritage by connecting them to the mythical Norsemen, a more primitive history than that typically associated with Caucasians. Ingrid says to Astrid, "We received our coloring from Norsemen…Hairy savages who hacked their gods to pieces and hung the flesh from trees. We are the ones who sacked Rome…Don't forget who you are" (4). Though Fitch still aligns her characters with whiteness, she connects them with an exotic past, removed from the traditional behaviors of civility with which white culture is usually espoused. Fitch's purpose in attempting to exoticize the mother and daughter is unclear; however, Thus, Fitch is an example of an author feeling the need to liven up white culture, though the ethnic additive is not empowering for the matrilineal line but rather aligns Ingrid and Astrid to a predominantly male tradition rather than one that has any female bearing.
[101] Exotic othering refers to the viewing and treatment of a person of color in ways that are positive but only because that person is viewed in light of his or her differences from the white norm.

the Asian American stories are spiced up with Eastern contexts. However, she overlooks the fact that contemporary white literature rarely provides hope for mothers and daughters. I believe it is the grace and understanding extended to mothers, the potential strength of the mother-daughter bond, and the hope of restoration even amidst angst ridden mother-daughter relationships that draws white women so strongly to stories by women of color.

Furthermore, while whites being drawn to ethnic culture just for variety's sake is troubling, it is equally so to dismiss ethnic cultural elements in a minority writer's work as only existing to provide entertainment. Perhaps contrary to the importance I place on cultural relevance to her writing, Tan insists that she is uncomfortable with people advocating that she is a cultural expert. In fact, she says, "I am alarmed when reviewers and educators assume that my very personal, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative down to the nth detail not just of Chinese Americans but, sometimes, of all Asian culture" (5). However, as I will show, although Tan may not be an expert on every nuance of Asian culture, her portrayal of the Chinese American mother-daughter relationship and its intersection with a working mother lines up with research regarding sociological realties indicating that mother-guilt and blame are not instigators of angst in ethnic mother-daughter relationships as they are in white culture. Tan portrays working mothers positively due to her ethnic roots not because she is an expert on her culture but because one does not have to be an expert to internalize the values and mores of culture; it happens organically. I do not claim that Tan seeks to educate white culture on how to more positively enact the mother-daughter bond through an acceptance of working mothers. This goes beyond what is verifiable and seems to contradict what Tan sees her own purpose as being, as she says, "I don't write books to teach people anything. If readers learn something, that's their doing, not mine" (6). My exploration of *The Kitchen God's Wife* will show how we as readers

154

can certainly learn something about positive mother-daughter interactions through the freedom from guilt mothers are granted regarding working outside the home.

Tan's text *The Kitchen God's Wife,* which is set in present time, is the story of a mother, Winnie Louie, and her daughter, Pearl Louie Brandt, and their reconciliation through the power of storytelling. The mother and daughter live in San Jose, California, and for most of Pearl's life, she and her mother have had a strained relationship. As Pearl says, "And whenever I'm with my mother, I feel as though I have to spend the whole time avoiding land mines" (16). At the onset of the novel, Winnie has not disclosed many details of her past life in China, including her oppressive and abusive first marriage and the loss of most of her children from this marriage, out of her shame and fear of being misunderstood by her daughter. One of the central secrets of their relationship is that Pearl's biological father is Winnie's first husband. Pearl, on the other hand, has not revealed to her mother that she has been diagnosed with and suffers from multiple sclerosis. It is only due to the prodding of Helen, a close family friend who threatens to tell each woman's secrets to the other if they do not divulge the secrets themselves, that both mother and daughter open up to one another. The bulk of the text consists of Winnie's first person account of her life in China, set during World War II. For most of the text, Winnie narrates the story of her life while Pearl listens.

Tan does not point to Winnie's role as a working mother as any sort of significant factor in the tension between Winnie and Pearl. Rather, the issues between them stem directly from Pearl not understanding the traditional expectations in old China and the ways in which these have both worn down and affected her mother and Winnie's unwillingness to teach Pearl about her past, for fear of her being viewed negatively. Winnie's identity as both a Chinese woman in her younger years as well as her current identity as a Chinese American creates a complicated

persona. Winnie desires for Pearl to assimilate into American culture, which Pearl does, even

marrying a white American and raising her daughters in a typical American manner, valuing

self-sufficiency and focusing little on heritage. Yet, this creates a chasm between mother and

daughter. Winnie perceives her daughter as an American in a way that she realizes she is not. At

one point, she references Pearl's "American mind" and contrasts this with her own, which she

does not define as American (313). Psychologist Paula Caplan comments on the complicated

mother-daughter relationship of Chinese Americans:

> For Chinese-American mothers also, negotiating identity is a significant task. Neither
>
> captive slaves nor conquered indigenous peoples, Chinese Americans represent the
>
> immigrant experience of having come to America in the belief that life could be better
>
> here. They come by choice, with goals, and often with a strong impulse to assimilate or at
>
> least conform. They encourage their children to learn American ways to secure their
>
> advancement, at the same time trying to retain for them what they value in their Chinese
>
> heritage. ("Don't Blame Mother" 30)

As I seek to do, Caplan locates the problematics of the mother-daughter relationship not within

Chinese cultural expectations of motherhood but rather within the complexities of straddling

cultures.

There is clearly strain within Winnie and Pearl's relationship; mother-blame exists.

Winnie says to Pearl, "I didn't tell you about my past, and still you thought I was a bad mother.

If I had told you—then it would be even worse" (398). However, similarly to the mother-

daughter strain at work in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the struggles arise from

generational differences associated with being or not being immigrants and degrees of

acculturation rather than culturally engrained beliefs about mothers. As Lindsey emphasizes,

"When children become more 'Americanized,' intergenerational conflicts increase…" (262). As Pearl has lived only in America, she is even more Americanized than the García girls, who immigrate and periodically return to their homeland.

While Tan's story does include a strained mother-daughter relationship, the purpose of the novel, rather than condemning the mother, seems to be for her daughter to understand her. Part of this understanding takes place through viewing Winnie's role as a working mother objectively, rather than automatically equating this with negative connotations. Tan emphasizes the multiplicity of roles women embody, rather than being tied down by a label, by allowing Winnie to tell of herself as she perceives herself, both before and after she becomes a mother. A. M. Marie Booth Foster says that *The Kitchen God's Wife* emphasizes "balancing hyphenation and the roles of daughter, wife, mother, sister, career woman" (96). Winnie's role as a working mother is a relatively peripheral detail to the overall story line. Tan identifies Winnie's profession and includes it in the story line but does not portray Winnie's occupation as something that has greatly influenced her character or her relationship with her daughter. This is in keeping with other Asian American texts such as Nora Okra Keller's *The Comfort Woman*. In Keller's text, since the mother, Akiko, is a widow of a working class man, it is assumed that she must work to provide for herself and her daughter, but Keller never focuses on this. Similarly, in Tan's work *The Joy Luck Club*, some of the mothers (also unconnected with wealth of any sort) become widows and, more than likely, must work in some capacity. Yet, the daughters do not reference this aspect of their mothers' identity when divulging portions of their story. These similarities amongst Asian American texts suggests that this culture looks differently at working mothers than does white culture, which often spends a great amount of time, as my examination

of Fitch demonstrates, on anxiously representing the merging of motherhood with a working identity.

Although the older and wiser Winnie who greets readers at the opening of the book appears to have no working mother anxieties or regrets and seems to have passed this confidence onto Pearl, Tan does show Winnie's growth from a traditional to modern woman in reference to her views on women's roles. As I showed earlier that China's acceptance of working mothers grew from a respect for womanhood in general, so Winnie's acceptance of working mothers stems from a valuing of female agency. Early on, Winnie perceives non-traditional women as negative, "Hulan was telling me there was a Chinese schoolteacher who went crazy, left her husband, and now wanted to sleep with the American air force, everyone, married or not, young or old, it didn't matter" (300). Winnie and Hulan/Helen, easily accept the story of a working woman as an unscrupulous one. Winnie goes on to label "crazy Chinese girls" as unvirtuous women, often in association with their deviation from traditional roles, "university students, teachers, nurses, and others…" (300). However, as Winnie becomes more and more desperate in her extremely patriarchal marriage, in which her husband abuses her and her children, she simultaneously develops a more progressive stance on the roles of women. When Winnie seeks to escape her marriage, she sees the strength of working women who have left their husbands: "The other women were coming home for lunch, one at a time, from their different workplaces. One tutored students in French. Another worked in a shoe factory. Another made straw brooms and sold them on the street. They came from many different backgrounds" (355). Thus, before Winnie ever arrives in the U.S. and becomes a working mother, she first changes her mind about the place women should occupy. Once she accepts their right to be in the public sphere, moving

from an Old China to New China philosophy of femininity, she sees no contradiction with women occupying the public sphere even if they have children.[102]

Winnie also positively views a widowed working mother, whom she references as Beautiful Betty. Betty firsts holds an office job as a telegram operator and later works as a seamstress to provide for herself and her son. Winnie explains how she even begins to emulate Betty's attitude: "That's how Wan Betty was, always speaking honestly...And soon, I found myself talking the same way" (209). Betty's experiences as a working mother influences the agency she exhibits through her speech, which serves as a positive example for Winnie and the similar route she will eventually follow as a widowed working mother. Although she does not view *The Kitchen God's Wife* this way, academic and author Judith Caesar notes that one can misread the novel as a glorification of American female agency over Chinese female subjectivity, "[O]ne can see the novel as a rather smug indictment of the misery of women in traditional Chinese society in contrast to American society's enlightened feminism" (38). However, the fact that Winnie changes her viewpoint about women's place in society and specifically the workforce before entering the U.S. shows that Tan complicates Western views of the East as unprogressive regarding female autonomy.

Though Winnie comes to view female agency as important even before she has children, she is not actually a working mother during Pearl and her brother's[103] early years. It is after the untimely death of her second husband, Jimmy, when Pearl is fourteen that Winnie opens a flower shop with her close friend Helen. Pearl perceives her mother's role as a worker positively,

_____

[102] Although Winnie lives in China at a time in which, technically, according to Judy Yung, China began attempting to allow women to become Western "new women," her original patriarchal mentality is reminiscent of Old China, showing that individual beliefs are more difficult to change than public policy.
[103] Winnie also has a son, Samuel Louie, who is less than two years younger than Pearl. He is referenced in the novel but never physically appears.

saying, "I suppose in some way, the flower shop became the dream that would replace the disasters" (14). She sees the flower shop as a symbol of hope and strength for her mother. In her adulthood, Pearl is critical of the old-fashioned style of the flower shop but respects the work her mother does. Upon being shown some of Winnie's flower arrangements, Pearl comments, "I am stunned by how much hard work this represents" (23). Pearl also recognizes that her mother has consistently taken pride in her work when she comments, "And now she steers me toward her real pride and joy…My mother has always been very proud of those red banners" (22-3). Though Winnie finds satisfaction in doing her job well, Pearl does not feel she has to (or had to during her adolescence) compete with the work for her mother's attention. This acceptance of a mother working hard at her job without labeling her as too career focused, as white culture typically does, relates to the value Asian culture places on a strong work ethic. Asian American culture is more likely to value hard work and see it as a good example for the children, which results in an uncritical perception of working mothers. Min Zhou, professor of sociology & Asian American studies, and feminist writer Jennifer Lee confirm, "Asian immigrant parents pass onto their children the cultural belief that increased effort leads to more positive outcomes" (8321). Therefore, working mothers may be viewed positively because it is recognized that their labor will lead to a desirable end for the family.

Tan shows that not only is Winnie personally successful by finding satisfaction in her work and having her daughter recognize the value in her work but also that Winnie is professionally successful in having built up and maintained a lucrative business. Part of the reason Winnie is so proud of her banners is that she designs them herself rather than copying a prescribed format, "She doesn't write the typical congratulatory sayings…All the sayings, written in gold Chinese characters, are of her own inspiration, her thoughts about life and death,

160

luck and hope" (23). Winnie finds purpose in her work and takes advantage of ways to bring her creativity into it, but, ultimately, the decisions she makes secure financial gain. Pearl comments, "My mother claims these banners are the reasons why Ding Ho Flower Shop has had success flowing through its doors all these years. By success, I suppose she means that the same people over the last twenty-five years keep coming back" (23). Pearl's affirmatively viewing her mother's commitment to her work is influenced by the proof of the customers' satisfaction and loyalty, which equates into economic security for Winnie.

Winnie's ability to focus on and succeed at her work, especially during the early years of building the business while her children are at home, is aided by the fact that most Asian American mothers do not typically feel the guilt that white working women feel. Author and editor Veronica Chambers, who is a woman of color, notes, "Guilt just isn't a currency in our lives the way it is in the lives of white women" (66). As evidence of this lack of guilt, sociologist Emily Greenman reports on how Asian American mothers are more likely to continue with their work as usual after having children rather than believing they should alter their work schedule due to their parental role. She maintains, "Asian American women's earnings advantage may result from Asian American women not adjusting their labor force behavior as much as White women in response to parenthood" (Greenman 39). Asian American mothers are less likely to switch to the "mommy track" than white women, making them more likely to obtain career advantages. Because Asian American culture is more receptive to the idea that women should continue to work while mothering, it is natural that Tan would not only avoid pointing to Winnie's work as a source of tension between herself and her daughter but also highlight the success of Winnie's business.

Winnie as a working mother is typical of the average Asian American mother, 63% of which work (Cohn 1).[104] This high number may be due to attitude shifts in China regarding working mothers as well as twentieth century Chinese women's motivation for migrating to the U.S. in the first place. Yung explains,

> [D]eteriorating conditions, combined with the lowering of cultural restrictions against women traveling abroad, encouraged increasing numbers of Chinese women to emigrate overseas to join their husbands or to pursue educational and employment opportunities on their own. Unlike in the nineteenth century, when there were no gainful jobs for them in America, they now had an economic role to play in the urban economy or in their husbands' small businesses. (57)

Thus, while U.S. white mothers since the industrial revolution have been expected to remain at home, Asian American women, including mothers, relocated due to their valued role as workers. This is not to say that all Asian American mothers work. According to Cohn, "Among stay-at-home mothers, the 'traditional' married stay-at-home mother (with a working husband) is the most common type among Asians, whites and Hispanics" (3). However, though Asian Americans are more likely than many minority groups to adhere to a traditional family model, stay-at-home mothers are still a minority, constituting only 36% of the population (Cohn 3). Winnie is a traditional mother until Jimmy's death propels her into the work force, which is different compared to a mother who works along with having a working spouse. However, this does not mean that Tan only endorses mothers working if their children are no longer young. It likely reflects the specifics of Winnie's circumstances at that time. Cohn speculates that part of

---

[104] This statistic is recent, coming from a 2014 report. The Pew Research Center did not begin keeping statistics on Asian American stay-at-home mothers until 1987. For Asians, similar to other groups in the U.S., the number of stay-at-home mothers rose from 2000 to 2012, though this number is still well under half for Asian American mothers.

the reason so many Asian American mothers (by way of comparison to other cultural groups) do

not work is due to their status as immigrants.[105] Thus, even if a mother would like to work, she

may not have the necessary paperwork or language acquisition to do so. Winnie's entering the

work force when Pearl is fourteen, shortly following Jimmy's death, should not solely be

interpreted as a necessity for Winnie to support herself and her family, as Jimmy would likely

have had life insurance and assets, especially as a war veteran.[106] Neither should it be interpreted

as occurring because Winnie feels she is past the intensive years of mothering small children

when she is most needed at home. At this time coinciding with Jimmy's death, Winnie's

confidence as an American, with greater English language acquisition and familiarity with

American culture, might have propelled her into the work force regardless of whether she

became a widow, as current data shows that most Asian mothers do work outside the home. The

likelihood that Winnie's joining the work force is based on her acclimation to American culture

rather than on feelings of forfeiture based on either the loss of her husband or her changing role

as a mother of teens could positively impact the mother-daughter relationship. Pearl could have

realized her mother desires to provide and care for her but would not have the pressure of

believing that her mother structures her identity, as a worker or otherwise, off of her.[107]

---

[105] According to Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova in their report "Asian Immigrants in the United States," the number of Asian immigrants is only increasing: "Between 1970 and 1980, the number of Asian immigrants grew 308 percent from 825,000 to 2.5 million, then by 196 percent to 4.9 million in 1990…Asia is the second-largest region of birth (after Latin America) of U.S. immigrants…Asian immigrants are projected to comprise a greater share of all immigrants, becoming the largest foreign-born group by 2055, according to Pew Research Center estimates."

[106] At the very least, if Winnie began working out of financial need, with her husband's presumed assets, she probably could have worked only part time if she was only motivated by economic need.

[107] In keeping with typical perspectives of people of color regarding both domesticity and the workforce, Tan positively portrays both Winnie's role as a working mother and the years she spends with Jimmy as a full-time caregiver and housewife. This may be because, as a recently immigrated woman, Winnie's ability to stay at home suggests a degree of economic success for her family. Greenman claims that many Asian Americans feel the mother must work out of economic necessity for the newly immigrated family (42). Winnie's initially staying home displays financial security. Betty Friedan famously argues in *The Feminine Mystique* that being a full time housewife and caregiver will not fulfill a woman because she seeks her identity through her association with her family members as opposed to seeking meaningful work herself. Yet, as many critics such as bell hooks have pointed out, Friedan does not consider women of color in her work. Focusing only on the plight of middle-class, white women, Friedan fails to

While Tan positively portrays working women, specifically mothers, she also includes a scene in which Winnie expresses distaste for women having to work as domestics. Of the hired mourners at a funeral, Winnie says to Pearl, "Maybe these ladies can do two or three funerals every day…earn a few dollars. Good living that way. Better than cleaning houses" (43).[108] It is important to note that Winnie's negative reaction to women cleaning houses, or at least positing staged mourning as superior to housecleaning, is tied to the work's low status rather than Winnie endorsing a traditional Chinese belief that women should not work outside the home. Because working as a domestic has often been one of the few options for women of color, Winnie seems to believe that working as a domestic is undesirable work. Professor of Asian American history Ji-Yeon Yuh explains how Asian American immigrants fill what is sometimes called an hourglass economy, in which well-educated Asian immigrants fill jobs of highly trained professionals at the top of the glass, but poor, unskilled Asian immigrants occupy the blue collar jobs at the bottom of the glass. For those at the bottom, contrary to the idea endorsed within the American Dream, there is little chance of upward mobility. "They become janitors, house cleaners, cooks, dishwashers, and nannies—such 'woman's work' being increasingly done by hired help as more and more middle-class women of all ethnic backgrounds join the labor force"

---

consider that white women's longing to enter the workforce suggests privilege to begin with. Many women of color have always resided within the workforce because their economic status demands their employment. It is unclear to what degree Winnie's joining the workforce may be spurred by economic necessity. However, while Tan's text exemplifies a lack of guilt and blame associated with working mothers, one must recognize that although Pearl and Winnie's relationship is less tumultuous for not having to navigate such misperceptions, neither woman's role as a character of agency and strength comes from their occupation, which is a reductive way of viewing one's identity. Asian American female authors who spend little time exploring a mother's role in the workforce may do so because they seek to showcase the difficulties of a minority identity. They realize that outside employment does not automatically translate into agency for women of color.

[108] Scholar of American and women's studies Phyllis Palmer suggests that white women experienced "the problem that has no name" as Friedan calls it because after World War II, white women could no longer rely on "economically less powerful women," who would undoubtedly largely include women of color, to bear a large portion of the "household burden" (64). Palmer goes on to say, "Housework, Friedan implied, was dreary stuff that might be best done by working-class women (or men) with low job expectations; as an occupation for talented women, it was insufferable" (157). Certainly many Asian Americans fall into the category of working class women.

(Yuh 226). Winnie's positioning of certain types of work above others may be influenced by the type of work that has typically been made available to Asian Americans. The mourners are old women, beyond the time of raising a young family, but Winnie's beliefs about women workers in general extend specifically to her ideas about working mothers and her own experiences as a working mother. She finds no issue with women working; it is only when they must work menial jobs for subpar pay that she opposes it.

Ideologies about the acceptance of working mothers are apparent in Tan's depiction of Winnie's job and her perceptions of other women's jobs along with the way she has influenced Pearl to not only work but to also pursue an advantageous career. However, due to their strained relationship, Pearl is doubtful of her mother's support of her current position "as a speech and language clinician" (15). But, the issue is not *if* she should work, as Winnie respects that Pearl has decided to have a career, but rather what *type* of work she should do, what the best opportunity might be. Pearl says, "And while I was basically happy with the job, I secretly worried that I had missed a better opportunity. My mother had put those thoughts in my head." (15). Though Pearl fears she has not lived up to her mother's expectations, this quote exemplifies that her mother endorses her role as a working mother. (Pearl has two young daughters, Tessa and Cleo, whom she and her husband raise in addition to both of them holding a career.) In actuality, Winnie values her daughter's work. Rather than being critical of Pearl's job, Winnie feels doubtful of her own ability to properly interact with Pearl's professional life: "But Pearl has a good job, a speech therapist for retarded children, although she told me never to say that…I asked her to tell me what she did again and she wrote it down…I practiced saying this many, many times. I still have those words in my purse. I still can't say them. So now maybe Pearl thinks I'm retarded, too" (82). Although Winnie is a successful business owner, she feels

uneducated in comparison with her daughter. Nevertheless, readers can infer that Pearl's desire

to work and hold a job that others deem desirable is something she models after her mother.

Mary Blair-Loy, a scholar whose work focuses on gender, the economy, work, and

family, explains that because certain racial/ethnic cultures place great value on providing their

children with a high quality education, they are more willing to accept the role of working

mothers which allows for additional income to be used for their children's education, which they

equate with eventual success. This is in contrast to white culture's values; she explains, "The

schema of devotion to the family is a white and middle-class cultural model, rooted in the

nineteenth century and flowering in the postwar baby boom era, specifying that it is desirable

and worthwhile for women to spend most of their adult lives intensively caring for their

families" (Blair-Loy 19). Winnie's entrance into the work force after Jimmy's passing may have

increased the likelihood of Pearl's employment position as a speech therapist.[109] Not only has

Winnie provided for Pearl financially, making her ability to attend college and graduate school

more probable, but she has also positively modeled the possibility of a working mother.

Similarly to her mother, Pearl does not appear to suffer from any type of guilt as a

working mother. She and her husband recognize their need to be apart from their children at

times. Winnie often babysits her grandchildren. Greenman identifies nearby grandparents

providing childcare as normative in Asian American culture (44). Thus, Pearl's leaving her

children with Winnie suggests the freedom she feels as a mother and the acceptance of the Asian

practice of sharing parental responsibilities with close family members. Pearl says, "This [room]

---

[109] Pearl's success as the daughter of a working mother aligns with the study of Kathleen McGinn, a professor at Harvard Business School, whose research team reports that children of both sexes but especially daughters benefit from having a working mom. McGinn confirms that although many mothers feel guilty for working, the research indicates that they should not. Benefits for daughters of working mothers compared with those raised by stay at home mothers range from higher career placement and salary to more egalitarian family models with their own spouse and children.

is where they [Pearl's daughters] always stay whenever Phil and I go away for a medical convention. Actually, sometimes we just say it's a medical convention, and then we go back home and do all the household chores we aren't able to finish when the children are around" (16). Even though she is not consistently with her girls all day, Pearl is not anxious about not always being with them on the weekends either. While mother-blame and guilt are constant in white culture, Pearl herself seems to have little of this. Ivana Brown comments that "maternal ambivalence is largely socially and culturally based" (136).

Pearl's lack of ambivalence over whether or not she is a good mother is, arguably, tied to her upbringing in which being a good mother did not require constant parent/child contact. She is able to testify to the fact that working mothers can produce well-adjusted, prosperous adults and feels confident that raising her daughters similarly to the way she was raised is a good decision. Pearl is able to receive and pass on the benefits of working mothers without having to contend with the mother-guilt white women often experience. This is another way that, as Greenman puts it, "participating in full-time paid work may not be perceived as incompatible with fulfilling the role of a 'good mother' among Asian Americans to the same extent as among Whites" (43). Tan presents both Winnie and Pearl, who both provide financial security and offer a strong role model of independence to their children, as good mothers not in spite of their roles as working mothers but potentially *because* of their roles as working mothers. O'Reilly generalizes, "Most women mother in the patriarchal institution of motherhood and, in contemporary times, according to the patriarchal ideology of natural–intensive mothering" (*From Motherhood to Mothering* 7). This vastly overgeneralizes most women – as women of color do not adhere to what Hays describe as the central tenants of intensive mothering, being "the mother is the central caregiver" and "the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work" (Hays 8).

167

In looking at the conclusion of the novel, one can see how Tan's ending continues to veer from white ideologies typical of the mother-daughter relationship. Although, as mentioned earlier, Winnie and Pearl's relationship is not perfect due to issues tied to Americanization and acculturation, Tan ends her piece optimistically with the workings of a repaired relationship already underway. While white authored texts such as Fitch's novel leave the mother-daughter tension unresolved, Tan offers the hope of restoration between Winnie and Pearl as each opens up to the other and shares her secrets. The novel's concluding sentence reads, "But see how fast the smoke rises—oh, even faster when we laugh, lifting our hopes, higher and higher" (415). Rather than leaving readers viewing the mother negatively, Tan clearly presents Winnie's sharing her past as the catalyst for a positive mother-daughter bond. E.D. Huntley says, "Winnie's voice is that of the survivor, but it is also the voice of a mother who is compelled to share the story of her life with her daughter to give that daughter the strength she needs to confront the problems that threaten to overwhelm her existence" (84). Tan's text differs from both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *White Oleander*, which follow the pattern of white mother-daughter relationships being portrayed by white authors as irreparable. As Caplan puts it, "When white middle-class mothers are the subjects, it is usually in the context of a crisis or tragedy" ("Don't Blame Mother" 33). Tan, in contrast, provides an ending that is far from tragic. In addition to restoring Winnie and Pearl's relationship, Tan also shows that this theme of respecting the mother and one's relationship with her is passed on to Pearl's daughters. At a family event where Pearl's daughter Tessa questions the attire of someone, calling her weird, Winnie decides to capitalize on the moment by giving it didactic significance. She responds to her granddaughter, "She is weird because she did not listen to her mother" (404). Rather than belittling the statement, Pearl tells how her husband affirms the mother-daughter bond, "'It's

true,' says Phil. 'Look at your mother. She listened to Habu. Now she's not so weird.' Tessa regards me with new respect" (404). Though done in a light-hearted manner, this scene shows not only the bonding that takes place between Winnie and Pearl once their secrets have been shared but also the way this legacy of honoring the mother-daughter relationship is being conscientiously passed on to the next generation.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ABSENT VILLAGE: ISOLATED MOTHERHOOD IN WHITE CULTURE

Few would deny that raising a child is hard work; the emotional, financial, and even physical toll of parenting is enormous. However, despite a general acknowledgement of the huge responsibility involved, relatively little scholarship has been conducted from a critical whiteness perspective analyzing how white society's culturally constructed practices differ from those of minority culture's in reference to supporting parenthood. A lack of attention given to cultural variances is especially true for topics concerning women, who have historically and currently served as the primary caregivers. Despite the patriarchal expectations that shape experiences of motherhood in many cultures, women have most successfully mothered when they have been able to draw on support from other women. This support has been both emotional encouragement and tangible and practical assistance with caretaking. Adrienne Rich explains, "Throughout history women have helped birth and nurture each others' children. Most women have been mothers in the sense of tenders and carers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers. Tribal life, the village, the extended family, the female networks of some cultures, have included the very young, very old, unmarried, and infertile women in the process of 'mothering'" (12). While Rich's point, with its reference to "tribal life" may include a variety of people of color, it does not relate to modern U.S. white culture.

The model of mother support that Rich emphasizes is clearly prevalent in African American culture, having been identified as "othermothering" by scholars examining the practice. Patricia Hill Collins, a black feminist theorist, explains some of the historical communal practices enacted by women in black culture, "In African-American communities, the boundaries

distinguishing biological mothers of children from the other women who care for children are often fluid and changing…vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, 'othermothers,' women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood" ("The Meaning" 46-7). This acceptance of responsibility and concern that black women take for one another's children helps reduce the likelihood for mother-blame because no one mother has been solely influential in a child's life. It also reduces a mother's fear of failure and inadequacy because she is not exclusively responsible for providing for and guiding her children. This model is in direct contrast to the white practices surrounding motherhood, which Collins defines as the belief "that mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for child-rearing" ("The Meaning" 43). One model endorses interaction while the other endorses isolation. In this chapter, I will illustrate through Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* how isolated motherhood in white culture negatively impacts a woman's well-being as well as her relationship with her daughter. I will then showcase how the model of othermothering in African American culture aides the mother-daughter dynamic and explore how this is enacted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved.*

The yoke of slavery certainly made it impossible for many African American mothers to fully care for their children. Not only did long hours spent serving in the fields or house tax women physically but they were also emotionally pushed to a breaking point, being dehumanized by slave owners and white culture at large, making it difficult to muster both physical and emotional energy for their children. Added to this was the fact that because slave owners rarely valued their slaves' familial relationships, women often had to parent apart from

their children's father, having to function as both mother and father. In an effort to combat such

obstacles, African American women sought out the assistance of others to help with childrearing

as a means of survival for their family. However, even after slavery, African American women

have bonded together to care for one another's young, due in part to the necessity for most black

women to work to help provide for their family, but also simply because of the positive

association of othermothering in African American culture.[110]

The two main ways that othermothering is enacted are through kin relations, in which the

women assisting a mother are biological family, or fictive kin relations, in which women

assisting the mother are not relatives but are so close to the family they are considered as a type

of extended family. While the concept of kinship ties has been long established in

anthropological studies, Collins' unique contribution has been the focus on how this arrangement

has affected black mothers. In looking at kin relations, Collins says, "The centrality of women in

African-American extended families is well known" ("The Meaning" 47). Regarding fictive kin

relations in black culture, Collins teaches that "women-centered networks" took on the

responsibility of their "fictive kin" ("The Meaning" 47).[111] During slavery, othermothers were

---

[110] Countless scholars have commented on the usefulness of the othermothering model in African American culture.
Some find the model so useful that they seek to apply its central tenants to new contexts such as ways to achieve
success in the academic classroom for black students. A few of these scholars of which to take note are as follows:
Kimberly Griffin's "Voices of the 'Othermothers': Reconsidering Black Professor's Relationships with Black
Students as a Form of Social Exchange," Douglas Guiffrida's "Othermothering as a Framework for Understanding
African American Students' Definitions of Student-Centered Faculty," and Kimberly Griffin and Ivory Toldson's
"Reflections on Mentoring for Blacks in Academia (Editor's Note.)"

[111] This concept of acknowledging family-like closeness outside of the biological family unit may have been
influenced by anthropologist David M. Schneider's 1984 book *A Critique of the Study of Kinship.* Schneider argues
that although many scholars view indigenous groups through their kinship alliances, the category of kin as
biologically based is a Western construct and that primitive and indigenous cultures have not viewed close alliances
through blood ties. However, though Schneider's point that there should be other ways to gauge closeness besides
blood relationships is valid, he offers no sustainable alternatives. Thus, Collin's analysis that othermothering often
occurs in fictive kin attachments could be read as a type of response, though potentially inadvertently, to Schneider's
critique of viewing all ethnic close attachments as kin associations.

imperative because slavery prohibited mothers from being able to raise their own children; today they are necessary as a support against racism, patriarchy, and poverty.

Although Collins uses the term othermother specifically to apply to African American culture, the concepts of both kinship and fictive kinships ties relate to many ethnic cultures. Although even today, according to social work scholars Jennifer Szolnoki and Katharine Cahn, "[a]mong ethnic groups, African American communities have the highest rates of kinship caregiving," other minority cultures also adhere to this model of relatives assisting in childrearing (2). The other two ethnic groups I have previously discussed, Chicana culture and Asian American culture, both adhere to essential components of othermothering. Research proves that Chicana and Asian American culture also rely on familial assistance in childrearing. Regarding Chicana culture, sociologists Denise A. Segura and race relations scholar Jennifer L. Pierce claim that "kin networks and the larger ethnic community…can result in Chicanas feeling more strongly motivated to mother than European-American middle-class women whose kinship ties are more dispersed" (78). Regarding Asian American culture, Emily Greenman reports that "Asian American children are nearly two and a half times as likely as non-Hispanic White children (17% vs. 7%) to live in multigenerational households" (44).[112] Thus, despite cultural variances, African American, Chicana, and Asian American cultures all similarly respect and utilize kinship ties in family dynamics.

The similarities amongst minority culture's practices regarding othermothering continue, for Asian American and Chicana culture also cultivate fictive kin networks in similar ways to African American culture. Eric Jelm explores how Chicana culture adheres to fostering fictive

---

[112] While Greenman's research does not explicitly state that othermothering occurs in multigenerational households, since women are traditionally the caregivers, it is most likely that grandmothers, aunts, etc. are indeed performing othermother roles.

173

kin alliances. In his report for the Institute for Latino Studies University of Notre Dame he explains, "Whereas in U.S. 'American' culture, kinship is defined as biogenetic, Latino culture is characteristically more flexible with its interpretation. 'Family' includes extended relatives and even close friends who are incorporated into the tightly-knit kin network via fictive kinship relationships" (1). Correspondingly, Hispanic culture also employs the use of close friends to function in ways similar to family members invested in supporting the family unit. The Hispanic term for the concept of othermothers is *comadres* (co-mothers). In Latin culture, one of the strongest communal bonds is that of godparents, or *compadres*. Jelm states that "it is common to choose a non-relative to be a compadre—thus converting a weak interpersonal tie to a strong tie of fictive kinship" (6). Immigrants often rely on fictive kinship ties because they have left their biological families in their homeland and recognize their need for community with other immigrants. Ebaugh and Curry state, "Fictive kin systems expand the network of individuals who provide social and economic capital for one another and thereby constitute a resource to immigrants as they confront problems of settlement and incorporation" (189). Even once minority families have become established in the U.S., there can still be a need for fictive kinships. Regarding Asian Americans specifically, scholar of sociology and Asian American studies Bandana Purkayastha explains that generational differences, especially those exacerbated by assimilation, continue to create the need for fictive kinship ties: "Being networked with fictive kin helps older Asian Americans define a place for themselves, within affirming ties among people who share some of their pathways" (111). Thus, whether the practice is instituted via family or friends, minority cultures have a rich history of valuing the collective nature of caregiving as well as caregiver support, specifically when tied to women's roles as mothers.

Rather than white culture adhering to othermothering concepts of either kinship or fictive kinship ties, research suggests that familial ties and friendships are less intense and less likely to receive and offer assistance. One of the reasons that families do not often assist in parental support and childrearing is that families in white culture tend to spread out geographically. Gloria I. Joseph, academic and feminist activist, and Jill Lewis, professor of literature and gender studies, note, "In the widest sense, the settling of the United States and the very process of immigration involved a splintering of community which broke the kinship and support networks women had in different, smaller-scale European communities…" (130). The very process of occupying America has been one that has disrupted close familial ties, eliminating the traditional practice of kin networks.

Although I have made a hypothesis based on the impact of physical distance, there is almost no scholarship from a critical whiteness perspective analyzing *why* white culture does not have stronger kinship ties. However, media and popular culture have certainly shaped current perceptions on misappropriating kinship ties. The television show *Everybody Loves Raymond* comically portrays the disadvantages of a family living too close to the husband's parents. The antagonism specifically between the wife Deborah and the mother-in-law Marie suggests that young mothers are better off without meddling female relatives. Countless other examples in entertainment—including the film *Hope Floats* starring Sandra Bullock, the film *Georgia Rule* starring Jane Fonda, and the television series *Parenthood* focusing on Sarah Braverman's story— show close proximity and interactions with family members, specifically between adult mothers and daughters, as a last resort: only after one is unable to make it in the 'real world' does she return to live with or near family. Furthermore, although these films do show some familial restoration, the overall focus on a romantic relationship which ignites due to the homecoming

overshadows the theme of the benefits of familial ties, especially those related to supporting and assisting mothers as caregivers.

Since whites do not expect family members to assist in the support and maintenance of childrearing, they are even less likely to expect a friendship or acquaintanceship to function in this capacity. Similar to the research available on kinship ties, research from a critical race perspective mostly compares strong fictive kin ties in cultures of color with the weak fictive kinship ties in white culture. Sociologists Helen Rose Ebaugh and Mary Curry report that "most research on friendship networks among Anglos fails to document any type of fictive kin relation," suggesting that most white friendships do not foster the type of intimacy typical in familial relations (193). Yet, this research offers the facts but not the motivating epistemologies behind them. Uncovering the reasons why white culture has little expectations of friends and family regarding successful mothering requires a retrieval of part of the core American mythos. Dominant white U.S. culture has been highly influenced by a valorization of individualism. Political scientist Stephanie M Walls, author of *Individualism in the United States*, claims, "On the individual level, modern individualism negatively affects the quality of life for each person through promoting alienation…" (146). This alienation is self-imposed but enacted due to an individual's desire, likely unconscious, to adhere to dominant standards of interaction. Although a fair amount of scholarship exists on isolation in American culture, little of it specifically addresses the fact that such isolation is typically only true for white American culture.[113]

---

[113] Elizabeth C. Hirschman argues that rugged individualism is a core American culture value in her article "Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars--The Semiotics of Rugged Individualism." Cora Du Bois writes on the importance the U.S. places on individual self-reliance in "The Dominant Value Profile of American Culture." Philip Slater argues that American individualism leads to isolationism, especially in modern culture, in *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point.* However, none of these authors examine race as a key factor.

American concepts such as rugged individualism can instigate physical isolation but even more foster a mentality of the need for self-sufficiency, leading to emotional isolation. Even less research exists on the ways that white mothers, in particular, feel isolated. Yet, it is because American culture at large values independence that white mothers tend not to give and receive assistance with their children and households. The mommy myth, which I have addressed in previous chapters, is what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels describe as an accepted belief in the need for a mother to independently and flawlessly perform all maternal duties. This white construction and adherence to the mommy myth, which is another form of valorized individualism, has resulted in emotionally isolated mothers.

While ethnic groups do hold cultural values that balance or even mitigate some of the "American" values that promote individualism, the communal structure of such communities is not always a choice. In fact, minority cultures are becoming increasingly assimilated, showing that, just like whites, they can be influenced by dominant culture. However, a key reason that minority cultures live in close communities is that they do not have the economic capital to move. Furthermore, due to white privilege, even when whites are born into poverty, according to economist Richard Reeves, they are more likely to climb to a higher economic status. As people of color are more likely to live in and remain in poverty,[114] they are less likely to become well educated and networked, which are two important criteria for relocating for a job, which is a primary reason many families and friends in white culture spread out.[115]

There is no evidence or scholarship of dominant white culture utilizing either kinship or fictive kinship ties (though both white religious and white ethnic groups—which I would

---

[114] Policy analyst Sean Mcelwee states, "[T]he risk of poverty is higher for people of color" (n.p.).

[115] Catey Hill, editor of *Market Watch*, reports, "'People relocate for a number of reasons, but the most common is to accelerate their careers,' says Chad M. Oakley, president and COO of Charles Aris, an executive search consulting company" (n.p.)

consider sub-groups within dominant culture—could be argued to function in alignment with these concepts though not usually adopting these terms.)[116] However, a fair amount research has been conducted on friendship amongst white women, though this is a relatively new area of study. The topic began attracting attention in the mid 1970s with the work of historian Caroll Smith-Rosenberg who brought to light the fact that women's friendships had received almost no scholarly attention at the time of her work. Pat O'Connor's *Friendships Between Women* (1992) continues with the idea that female friendship is an underexplored topic, and although she does provide historical grounding for its past occurrence, O'Connor mostly explores the ramifications and facets of female friendship during the early 1990s. O'Connor's text is one of the more recent studies of female friendship; the dearth of scholarship produced on the topic suggests the continued lack of interest in female friendship. Though she draws on sociology, feminism, and social psychology, O'Connor and others with her focus do not consider the implications of race.

---

[116]   An exception to white culture's tendency to promote superficiality amongst female networks may be found within religious circles. Although she recognizes community growth can occur outside the context of religion and most has in contemporary times, Walls posits, "Historically, religion had been a path toward community building, community obligation, and cooperation among individuals" (103). Addressing religion's role in creating supportive interactions, psychology professor Kyle Gibson explains, "As we bond with God, we bond with other 'kin' who share our beliefs." He then goes on to claim, "The emotional nature of religious ritual binds believers together in a way secular ideologies cannot" (14). Possibly due to a shared desire for personal cultivation and restoration via spirituality, religious women tend to at least attempt to penetrate superficiality. Kate Harris, Caucasian Executive Director of the Washington Institute for Faith, deconstructs typical practices amongst women saying, "I find that the ability of women to meet the practical needs of fellow moms is astoundingly rare." Harris then goes on to define community as "a place for women to talk with each other about their needs and limits…" (n.p.). Thus, there are, potentially, white women seeking to escape a relationship of superficiality for something more profound.

       Additional groups, regardless of religious affiliations, may be attempting to support women in meaningful ways. Historically, there are examples of ethnic white groups (Irish, Polish, Italian, etc.), who, more similarly to minority groups of color, have dealt with issues of survival which push women toward deep encounters. (However, as previously marginalized groups become adopted into mainstream culture, it is possible that practices will more closely coincide with typical white ideologies and practies.) Wells touches on alliances within white ethnic minorities through her portrayal of the Whitmans, Teensy's family. Genevieve, a Creole French woman, is the most positive mother figure in the book and serves in many ways as a surrogate mother to Vivi. Her relationship with her own daughter Teensy is much more positive than is Vivi's relationship with Buggy, perhaps in part due to the ethnic minority mindset of the importance of community and familial relations. Even after Genevieve commits suicide, Teensy harbors none of the mother-blame so apparent throughout the rest of the book. She states, "I know Maman loved me. She did not kill herself because she did not love me" (252).

Instead, she "highlight[s] the importance of locating discussions of friendship with a particular social and cultural context (looking, for example, at the way in which friendships reflected and reinforced class position)"(2). However, in interpreting culture as solely meaning socioeconomic status, race is completely elided. Her study focuses on white women or takes no note of differences amongst women of different races. In addition to a superficial examination of race, both O'Connor and Smith-Rosenberg's work also shows how othermothering is a concept that is mostly lost to white culture; for although mothers are mentioned in the types of women to form friendships, the emphasis on a relationship with the primary purpose being support of the woman in her mothering is absent.

Although there can be overlap, there are significant differences between female friendship and othermothering. The scholarship on female friendship emphasizes companionship and establishing enjoyable encounters. Psychologists Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson, for instance, offer a variety of functions that friendship can serve, "Friendship ranges from deep, abiding love to temporary companionship, from soul-searing intimacy to momentary shared laughter…Women discover that friendships can take many different shapes, and they have friends for quite different purposes" (13). None of the purposes Apter and Josselson address, however, emphasize communal support of a woman in her mothering role and support for her children. Of course, Apter and Josselson are not focusing on mothers and motherhood but rather on female friendship in general. However, because most women are or will become mothers, a thorough analysis of female friendship could have explored not only how the dynamics of motherhood affect friendships but how friendships should (or could) impact motherhood.

Many have taken note that friendships often change when a woman becomes a mother; however, the focus is usually on how the mother can adapt to make room for both congenial

relationships and family life. What is seldom explored is how the friendships could or should change to help the woman in her new or expanding role as mother. For example, *What to Expect*'s online article "Relationships After Baby: Fading Friendships?" suggests that mothers need to be careful to [m]ake time for them [friends] on a regular basis (even if that's just once a month) for lunch or a drink (without baby in tow)" (n.p.). The article encourages mothers, "At first, stick to familiar topics — the shared interests that brought you together. You needn't make mention of the baby off-limits; good friends will always want to know how your little one is and about your new life. Just don't let baby talk monopolize the conversation" (n.p.). Such advice suggests that the nature of the friendship should remain the same, and it is the mother's job to fit her mothering role into the existing relationship rather than having the friendship function, at least in part, to support her maternal role.The absence of any investigation or consideration of ways that women could assist one another in motherhood speaks to white culture's belief that mothers should handle their families on their own and that friendships exist outside of the realm of familial influence. Because there is no practice of othermothering, white mothers often feel they must choose between female relationships or their families, rather than imagining the possibility of friendships that exist largely to help families flourish. Relationships between women in white culture often oscillate around the concept of friendship, which is mostly viewed as a relationship to encourage comradery and enjoyment rather than an alliance based less on mutual interest and more on mutual need.

Rather than a casual friendship, othermothering relationships often reflect a sense of duty for very survival. Collins writes, "Providing for Black children's physical survival and attending to their affective, emotional needs continued as interdependent dimensions of an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood ("The Meaning" 48). The same could be said for other women of color.

While there are certainly white mothers, mostly those in poverty, who have had to fight for their own and their children's survival, they remain marginalized, atypical for what constitutes the mythology of normative white culture. Collins explains the differences in white motherhood as contrasted with ethnic women's motherwork, "Themes of survival, power, and identity form the bedrock and reveal how racial ethnic women in the United States encounter and fashion motherwork" ("Shifting the Center" 49). Middle-class white women have not had to fight for physical survival; this may be why their alliances with other women tend to be rather superficial, as opposed to ethnic cultures, where women support one another often with survival being a primary goal.

However, it would be unfair to fault white women, who have often had such different experiences from women of color, for not having the weighty reason of physical survival for coming together. Because this has not been their history, one might indeed expect their relationships with other women to look different than what we see in communities of color. White women must be aware of their privilege and strive to combat the oppression of others, but they should simultaneously realize that they also have and still continue to face obstacles over which they can bond. White mothers specifically have lived under the shadow of the cult of domesticity and have had to function within the paradigm that each mother should perfectly manage her children and her household with little assistance from either her spouse or female peers.[117] White mothers' resulting stress and feelings of incompetence and failure, which cannot be shared for fear of appearing to others as incapable have resulted in emotional isolation. Ironically, this dynamic has existed simultaneously and coincides with networks of female friendships and acquaintanceships. The trope of the isolated housewife, which is typically

---

[117] White women did receive assistance through domestic workers; as I will discuss later on, the cult of domesticity actually helped create the need for domestics.

understood to embody the role of a mother,[118] is one that has been acknowledged, most famously in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Yet, what has not been done is a careful analysis of whether it is *being* a housewife or the *way* in which one enacts housewifery that causes the isolation. After all, there are women of color who are also housewives, but women from those communities seem to experience less emotional isolation than their white counterparts.

The work that has been done on isolated mothers tends to blame industrialism for women's feelings of loneliness and desperation. One example is author and historian Susan Strasser who argues that with twentieth century industrialism "[w]omen lost…intimate connections with their families and with other women formed through work" (8). Strasser explains that through the separate spheres ideology in which men went away to work and women remained at home to care for the house and children, wives lost daily connections with their husbands. Then, Strasser goes on to argue, due to the lightened housework load that modern inventions made possible, women also lost the connection of shared working experiences with one another.[119] She ultimately claims that because modern mothers do not have time consuming work to share, they have lost meaningful ways of relating to each other. Though unidentified, Strasser is analyzing white culture, as women of color would likely be working rather than being stay-at-home housewives. While I agree that white mothers tend to feel emotionally isolated even when they interact with other mothers, I do not believe it is due to the replacement of archaic household chores with modern appliances. Minority women, who are also using modern conveniences, do not experience the same emotional isolation.[120] Instead, I believe the isolation

---

[118] Macmillan dictionary defines a housewife as one whose central duties are taking care of the house and children.
[119] Betty Friedan also addresses lightened chore loads for housewives due to modern conveniences. However, she argues that isolation occurs because women now have more time on their hands rather than because they no longer have the share experience of performing labor intensive household chores.
[120] The glorification of labor-intensive housework hearkens back to the cult of domesticity, endorsed by white culture.

white mothers experience is due to their privileged position, a position that encourages them to view their lives as something they should be able to manage on their own. They derive self-esteem and status in the successful management of their homes and children. They do not know how to support one another because seeking assistance suggests personal failure and offering assistance suggests someone else's failure.

Though Strasser emphasizes that women miss important interactions through the dissolution of communal work, she does not argue that women no longer interact with one another. Instead, she contrasts the interactions, saying of today's women, "They met each other in groups organized around their children's activities, not around their own adult work, as the sewing circle had been" (239). However, Strasser's disapproval of mothers interacting through such child-focused arenas reflects a diminutive attitude toward mothering that is indicative of one of the previously mentioned misconceptions of 2nd Wave Feminism: the belief that it is not enough for women to choose to care for their children. Because women were traditionally expected only to mother, there is now a backlash from some feminist viewpoints that perceive it as not enough if women choose only to mother. It is not necessarily important what mothers do when they interact; what is important is what occurs amidst the interactions. If mothers involved, for example, in play groups and family-friendly organizations interact through voicing their children's needs but not their own as caregivers, seeing this as breaking the protocol of self-sufficiency, this ruptures the possibility for othermothering (and, unfortunately, this is often the case.) If, however, the women meeting in organized groups centered on their children are able to assist one another with their children and continue the interactions outside of the play date, the interaction is not futile just because its purpose is child play rather than women's work.

Questioning whether isolation is even a notable concern, sociologists Linda Bell and Jane Ribbens take issue with the idea that housewives are as isolated as has been asserted. They argue that housewives interact with other women in settings in which socialization occurs, though this is not the primary purpose of the interactions. They claim, "A pre-occupation with the notion of the 'isolation' of 'housewives' has led social researchers to neglect sustained examination of the social relationships within which many/most mothers are involved on a day to-day basis" (227). Their studies surveyed white women and found that many women interact with other women through community-focused and children-focused activities in such ways that the term 'isolated' is perhaps inappropriate. Bell and Ribbens ask, "How do we distinguish between social links providing social contact, or resources and/or emotional closeness; why do some still leave the woman feeling psychologically isolated?" (232). Thus, in keeping with the motif of the isolated housewife, Bell and Ribbens acknowledge that some stay at-home-mothers often feel alone; however, they do not go all day without interacting with others. The women that they surveyed revealed that they are not isolated in the sense that they are stuck at home and do not see other women; rather, most admitted that they do not have close confidants with whom they share intimate details of their lives and do not receive or give any sort of familial assistance with other women. This feeling of isolation seems to stem from what the women perceive as the purpose of their interactions with other women and whether intimacy and support is a pursued outcome.

From a critical whiteness perspective, it is apparent that Bell and Ribbens do not interpret emotional isolation (they reference this idea as psychological isolation) as occurring due to physical isolation; rather, it stems from white mothers' unsupportive interactions with other women. Emotional isolation emerges from what the mother internalizes as a lack of being known. However, women's emotional isolation can occur not only due to feelings of loneliness

but also feelings of being overwhelmed and in need of assistance. Even amongst white women who maintain friendships, tangible needs often go unmet. Bell and Ribbens acknowledge that friendships do not usually offer needed assistance but that other types of interactions amongst mothers which are not focused on companionship may. They ask, "[H]ow can we capture aspects of 'friendship' as well as aspects of 'instrumentality' that may be present in complex ways…Women may become 'friendly' in quite an instrumental way, to help one another through various exchanges, but in the process they may build a very real sense of community" (235).

Although Bell and Ribbens do not introduce the concept of othermothering, their recognition that female friendship often fails to satisfy while other types of female interactions may provide needed assistance is critical to my argument. Othermothers offer needed assistance and support to mothers, creating real community amongst women; however, pursing fun and companionship is not the goal. Bell and Ribbens' description of friendship is not synonymous with mothers assisting one another in their roles as mothers; in fact, based on the surveys, most white women do not even imagine this possibility even from friendship. Bell and Ribbens' conclusion is that "individual women are likely to have social networks which spread across a number of local and overlapping settings, leading to complex webs or relationships of varying levels of significance" (248). These findings highlight the fact that white women can and do interact with other women, but mostly in superficial ways. I would consider this a form of emotional isolation, perhaps even more-so because of the impotence of so many of the encounters.[121]

---

[121] Bell and Ribbens also argue that "not every woman wants to have close and frequent social contacts with others" (232). They align themselves with other theorists such as Jocelyn Cornwell, Ann Leffler, Kathryn McCannell, and Lynn Richards by questioning the common assumption that "isolation is always bad and community always good" (232). It is probably important to acknowledge individual personality and the potential of introverts and extroverts to have different needs regarding community which supersedes conceptions of social practices. However, ideas fostering an independent woman who does not need community adhere closely to the mainstream American, i.e.

Ineffective Mother Support within Female Friendships in Wells'

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (1996) by Rebecca Wells offers a powerful example of emotionally isolated mothering. Through the account, one can observe how the lack of othermothering affects not only mothers personally but also their relationships with their daughters. This novel is the story of the Ya-Yas, four life-long friends, Vivi, Necie, Caro, and Teensy, and their friendships, beginning in childhood–in the 1930s/40s–and extending into old age–in the 1990s. The narration largely follows Vivi's story and is most often focalized from her perspective. While endearing and sincere, this Ya-Ya friendship is, in many ways, largely focused on having fun. Although all four women are mothers and interact almost daily with one another, they do not view their roles in each others' lives to be supporting the family unit. While each Ya-Ya privately deals with the pressures of being a wife and mother, their time spent together serves as a way to escape the demands of their lives rather than better deal with them.

Divine Secrets chronicles the tension between Siddalee, a forty year old successful New York stage director, and her Southern-belle, Louisiana born and bred mother Vivi. Although Sidda's "relationship with her mother had never been smooth…" things escalate when Sidda divulges too much information to a reporter who weaves an elaborate story for the *New York Times* about Sidda being "no stranger to family cruelty" and "the battered child of a tap-dancing child abuser of a mother…" (2,1). Vivi proceeds to punish Sidda for her defamation by refusing to interact with her, which then pushes Sidda to embark on a soul-searching quest to understand her past with her mother as well as her own reservations about love which have resulted in her

---

white, belief in the importance of the individual. Ultimately, as *Divine Secrets* portrays, an isolated person is more likely to struggle attempting to deal with the pressures of life alone.

delaying her marriage to Connor McGill. Sidda begs her mother for information about Vivi's relationship with the Ya-Yas as a peace offering of sorts, saying she does not know much about female friendships and needs to learn from her mother in order to direct her next stage production. Vivi sends Sidda a scrapbook of the Divine Secrets, called "Ya-Ya-rabilia," though she has still not forgiven her, and through Sidda's perusal of the book and interactions with the other three Ya-Yas, she learns to let go of the past. The novel ends with Sidda and Connor visiting Vivi and Sidda's father, Shep, in Louisiana, where mother and daughter make amends and where Sidda and Connor are married in Sidda's hometown.

The dysfunction of Vivi and Sidda's relationship is typical, as I have suggested in previous chapters, of white mother-daughter relationships. The culture of mother-blame which often prompts authors to create obviously flawed mothers, symbolizing an internalized belief about the culpability of mothers, is also reflected within the novel. In moving beyond the basic plot line to the underlying dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship, it is riddled with drama and mother failings. Sidda and Vivi's relationship is ambivalent because although Vivi loves her four children, she is an alcoholic, having mothered her children as often as not, under the influence of her addiction. Furthermore, Vivi is a vivacious woman who wants more from life than the role of a housewife. During her early years of mothering, her difficulty in dealing with raising a family leads her into depression, and while under prescribed narcotics, she suffers a mental breakdown during which she beats her children. Most of what has happened during Sidda's girlhood is never discussed; thus, Sidda fixates upon the past, attempting to come to terms with the simultaneity of her mother's ferocious love, frustration, and anger. Vivi, on the other hand, is haunted with guilt and attempts to forget the past. She expects her daughter to be content with that decision.

Divine Secrets is about readers unearthing Vivi's life, parts of which Sidda knows little to nothing about. Sidda, like many daughters, only knows her mother as a caregiver rather than as a multifaceted person with an entire identity that was already established before motherhood. Most of Vivi's identity coincides with her role as a Ya-Ya, and as Sidda seeks clues about her mother's past, she learns more about the history of the Ya-Yas. Sidda is well aware of the Ya-Yas' impact on her mother, having grown up observing their countless interactions with Vivi. Sidda says of her mother, "[S]he made up her own solar system with the other Ya-Yas" (33). The four Ya-Yas start as friends in girlhood and continue their friendship once they marry and have children of their own. The second generation is called the Petite Ya-Yas. Sidda comments on the interconnectedness of the network, nostalgically remembering, "All of us so interwoven, so braided, growing up YaYa…" (39). The Ya-Yas have extensive interaction, due to both proximity and the longevity of their friendship.

In looking at how Wells' work has been received, academia's reaction has been minimal; the scholarship addressing *Divine Secrets* can be counted on a pair of hands. The articles written on Wells' work mostly focus on its association with consumerism and pop culture, southern literature, religion, interpersonal relations, addiction, and therapy. Although the novel explores the mother-daughter relationship, the few scholars who have written on it seem to find that topic too obvious to examine. Academics have also overlooked the masking of influential female relationships with superficial friendships. American literature scholar Thomas F. Haddox comments on how readers nostalgically view the Ya-Yas' relationship as indicative of a time in which women maintained closer relations, due to a less commercialized world. Haddox says that "many southern women seem to have also perceived a loss of community…and Wells's novels offer, in response to this loss, an image of women's community as a commodity" (179). Like the

reading public, this idealization of the friendship overlooks the Ya-Yas' lack of physical and

emotional support for mothers. Southern literature scholar Mary Ann Wilson gets closer, saying,

"Female readers identify with Sidda because they yearn, as she does, for her mother's intimate

circle of friends, for a world where people had time to nurture friendships and sustain

relationships, perhaps a misguided nostalgia, but real nonetheless" (5-6). Yet, Wilson does not

identify what is misguided in readers' glorification of the Ya-Yas' friendship.

In contrast, the topic of mother-daughter relationships, as has been discussed in chapter

three, has resonated well with the general reading public. *Divine Secrets* was a public sensation,

spending sixty-eight consecutive weeks on the best-seller list. Being so readily received by white

women, of whom Wells' audience is primarily comprised,[122] suggests that the text endorses

things that the majority of white women tend to either agree with or at least find interesting.

Though the complicated mother-daughter relationship is important to the text, I believe the novel

has also been successful due to its portrayal of female friendships. Wells provides her readers

with four close adult female friends in a culture in which many white women suffer from

emotional isolation and loneliness. Though I will show how the Ya-Yas' interactions fall short of

the othermothering connections these women truly need, I believe the general reading public has

idealized the Ya-Ya friendship, finding in it something worthy of celebration and emulation.[123]

---

[122] Nicholas Zill and Marianne Winglee's *Who Reads Literature? The Future of the United States as a Nation of Readers* supports the claim that most book buyers are white women. Though she does not specify that Wells' readership is white, based on the research that states white women are the primary reading demographic today as well as the affiliation of the main characters within the story, one can deduce that Well's primary audience is white women. (In another work, "Is the Help Realistic?," Travis states that "average white women readers have been determining bestsellers for centuries now."

[123] The HBO hit television series *Sex and the City* can similarly be argued to have been so popular due to its portrayal of steadfast female friendship. However, similarly to the Ya-Yas, though these (white) women share their lives intimately with one another, the two out of the four women who have children are not very supported in their mothering roles by the others. Largely, the friendships go on as normal after the arrival of the children due to the caregiving of nannies.

Typical reactions to depictions of female friendship in Wells' text suggests an unawareness of ways that white women can (and perhaps should) interact, not only for social purposes but also for familial sustainment. In "Divine Secrets of the Cultural Studies Sisterhood: Women Reading Rebecca Wells," Trysh Travis, a literary and cultural historian of the 20th-century U.S., has focused on the reception of the work, its impact on readers, and ways that they tried to imitate Ya-Ya friendship. Travis reports that after Wells went on her first book tour, "Ya-Ya clubs—not reading groups per se, but informally organized groups of women who had read her books—were forming spontaneously all over the country" (Travis 140). The nature of these groups, in keeping with the example of the fictional Ya-Yas, was focused on fun and escape, "Women rechristened themselves with Ya-Ya style names, organized drinking rituals, and attended Wells's readings wearing placards with 'Ya-Ya' printed on them" (Travis 140). Publisher Harper Collins even developed an Internet site for Ya-Yas to unite (and to avoid readers creating their own unofficial groups.) Such attempts at bonding suggests that women feel a need for companionship and fellowship with those who have shared an experience. Travis identifies Wells' women readers as looking for community. She quotes one woman as saying, "Our time together [is] our fun, crazy, girl time" (153). While there is nothing necessarily wrong with girl time, the superficiality of the bondings of these white women seem reflective of the fictional Ya-Yas.

Travis herself actually overlooks the possibility that the Ya-Yas' relationship is less than truly fulfilling. She claims that readers want the Ya-Yas' "utopian girlness" but that it "is not to be, because modern women [are] fractured and flustered by their too-busy lives…" (152). Thus, she notices the uniqueness of the Ya-Yas' relationship but does not view it as something that is either unfulfilling or undesirable. Travis claims that "we can read the Ya-Ya groups' longing for

female community as nascent protests against the status quo. There is some awareness among *Divine Secrets* fans that historical changes—particularly postindustrial economic change and its impact on family life—has robbed them of community" (153). However, this quote from Travis does not acknowledge the fact that even when women were not separated by distance and the demands of employment, feelings of isolation were still common, especially for mothers who required practical assistance to meet the demands of raising children.

The shortcomings of the Ya-Yas' relationship, which so often go unnoticed by readers and scholars alike, actually relates to the dysfunction Vivi and Sidda experience in their own relationship. On the surface, through Sidda and Vivi's reconciliation, Wells' book appears to show an empowered mother-daughter relationship, which is reflective of one of feminism's current missions. In 2010, feminist and maternal theory specialist Andrea O'Reilly addressed the strides feminism has made in addressing issues of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship, "[O]nly in the last few years has a theory of empowered mothering begun to develop in feminist scholarship." It is one that "seeks to challenge the dominant ideology of motherhood and change the various ways that the lived experience of patriarchal motherhood is limiting or oppressive to women" (17-8). Yet, what O'Reilly does not address is that problems associated with society's view of motherhood cannot be alleviated solely through critiquing patriarchy. Even a feminism that is cognizant of how racial oppression also inhibits women is not enough to adequately understand Wells' text because it does not explain the tension between Vivi and Sidda, both white women. A critical whiteness perspective is needed to show that white culture's expectations have blended with patriarchy to create an oppressive system for women in general and mothers in particular. It is helpful to initially approach *Divine Secrets* from a traditional feminist lens, but white culture's influence on dominant culture and its mothers and

daughters must be analyzed to truly locate the full source of the mother-daughter angst, which is tied to experiences and expectations of isolated motherhood.

The Ya-Yas are mothers during the 1950s and 60s, a time in which some have argued that white women were quite isolated. Friedan argues the necessity of women being more than wives and mothers largely due to their untapped potential from not working in paid employment. She also addresses that part of the "problem that has no name" which causes such unrest for the American housewife is connected to the isolation women felt. She says, "Each suburban wife struggled with it alone" (15). Friedan describes them as "women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children…" (43). Following traditional standards, the Ya-Yas all stay at home to raise their children and tend to their households. As the text emphasizes the time the women spend together, it is easy to overlook the fact that undoubtedly, they spend most of their time apart, even if they do meet on a regular basis. However, fairly large amounts of alone time would certainly be the case, as a homemaker's routine leaves little time for escaping the house and interacting with other women. Beyond the basic components of housekeeping, mothers have many additional caregiving responsibilities. Young children require the schedule of being home for meals and sleep and older children require having meals and laundry ready for them when they return from school.[124] Pointing to the rise of suburbia which expanded the physical proximity between families in the 1950s, Glenna Matthews, author of *Just a Housewife*, suggests that such living arrangements "reinforced a woman's isolation from the world of adults" (212). Though I do not find Vivi's issues largely to

---

[124] The legitimacy of Friedan's claim of housework encapsulating a housewife's time has been questioned. Glenna Matthews argues, "Although Friedan was to contend that women in the 1950s were being enjoined to chain themselves to their stoves, such was not the case" (211). Matthews explains that technology made cooking and cleaning easier. (As has been stated earlier, Strasser also argues this.) Though housewives may not have had to slave away on chores, Matthews does agree with Friedan that the home was a limiting sphere for women.

stem from physical isolation, this does have some bearing on her situation, as she is distanced

physically from others even more than women living in neighborhoods, as her family lives on a

plantation outside of town limits. Of course, such critiques of typical housewife roles within

suburbia or cities apply primarily to white women, as women of color would have been much

more likely to work and to live in more densely populated areas.[125]

Friedan's analysis that women were unsatisfied because they were not interacting enough

with the outside world has merit but does not take into account the fact that many housewives

were not really isolated. As Harvard's political scientist Robert D. Putnam explains, they were

well networked, seeing other women on a regular basis through civic and religious based

organizations.[126] Although such interactions still take up a minimal amount of a housewife's time

in comparison to the total hours spent at home, these outings are important to notice, for it

eliminates the notion of a woman who rarely leaves the house or who participates in adult

conversation only once her husband returns from work. There is evidence of such opportunities

---

[125]People of color's lack of access to suburbs was due to restrictions on employment which limited wealth and mobility, discriminatory lending practices in the housing and banking industries, and redlining practices that prohibited many families of color from home ownership in suburban neighborhood. People of color have also historically been restricted from skilled trades and occupations, denigrating them to menial, unskilled labor. Professionally, they have had difficulty being accepted into educational programs and then being hired and receiving advancement. According to California Newsreel's *"RACE - The Power of an Illusion* Background: A Long History of Affirmative Action - For Whites," not only were slaves not compensated for slavery after emancipation, but the wealth gap increased in America when Social Security was instituted but excluded the occupation of domestics and agricultural workers, two occupations largely held by people of color. Also, the Wagner Act allowed workers to form and join unions but allowed the unions to exclude non-whites, causing unions to remain mostly white until the 1970s. Also, the New Deal program allowed families who otherwise could not receive home loans.   "The government set up a national neighborhood appraisal system, explicitly tying mortgage eligibility to race. Integrated communities were ipso facto deemed a financial risk and made ineligible for home loans, a policy known today as 'redlining.'"

[126]While women today are much less networked through civic organizations, Putnam argues that the public in general was highly involved in organizations around the 1950s. Membership in traditional women's groups has declined more or less steadily since the mid-1960s. For example, "[M]embership in the national Federation of Women's Clubs is down by more than half (59 percent) since 1964, while membership in the League of Women Voters (LWV) is off 42 percent since 1969" (69). The same is true of religious affiliations, though in the 1950s these were a large form of socialization for women: "Church-related groups constitute the most common type of organization joined by Americans; they are especially popular with women… The 1960s witnessed a significant drop in reported weekly churchgoing—from roughly 48 percent in the late 1950s to roughly 41 percent in the early 1970s. Since then, it has stagnated or (according to some surveys) declined still further" (69).

for engagement in Wells' text, as she mentions the Junior League Club, the Girls Scouts, and the schools as common meeting places for women, but the Ya-Yas purposefully remove themselves from such associations. So, while the Ya-Yas socialize more with each other than in civic and community organizations, Wells depicts the reality of social opportunities for housewives in referencing common organizations with which women were involved, despite their maternal duties. Because the Ya-Yas' connection exceeds that of typical female interactions of that historical period, I would argue that Vivi's emotional isolation is not from not having or not seeing friends. Rather, Vivi's emotional isolation comes from not receiving the kind of support from her friends that she needs to deal with her role as wife and mother of four.

Although the Ya-Yas deeply care for one another, there is still an ironic disconnect within their relationship. The Ya-Yas are close enough friends to throw themselves an anniversary party each year to commemorate their friendship, have their children eat and sleep at one another's houses, and partake in countless other things that allude to a deep level of intimacy, yet they are unable to support Vivi in her inability to cope with her role as a housewife and mother. Wells describes Vivi as someone who wants to be a star, someone who desires attention. She has the longing Friedan claims women in her study had, a longing which drove them to depression because it was unmet through the drudgery of traditional roles. Friedan writes of the relief women feel upon realizing they are not the only ones who have felt dissatisfied with life, unable to truly buy into the feminine mystique, yet the Ya-Yas, as the supposed pinnacle of female friendship, do not penetrate beneath the veneer of their societally enforced roles. Friedan says, "I heard echoes of the problem in college dormitories and semi-private maternity wards, at PTA meetings and luncheons of the League of the Women Voters, at suburban cocktail parties, in station wagons waiting for trains, and in snatches of conversation overheard at Schraft's" (20).

Certainly this laundry list of places in which women began sharing with one another their

dissatisfaction does not suggest alliances of deep communion. Rather, it shows the desperation

the women felt, being willing to talk with whoever would listen and respond. Yet, in contrast,

Vivi admits, "I could not tell my friends about the things I did to my children when they pushed

me too far" (266). Othermothering relationships provide support for the mother so that her

children do not push her too far, or assistance if they do. Othermothering recognizes the many

responsibilities carried by the mother and offers her support to be able to most successfully

function within the family unit. The Ya-Yas' relationship, in contrast, focuses largely on how to

have fun in spite of the family. Vivi's emotional isolation occurs amidst continuous friendship

because her struggles with her children are outside the jurisdiction of Ya-Ya friendship which,

though constantly including children, does not focus on them.[127]

There seems to be something very contradictory about the Ya-Yas' relationship. They

interact constantly; they thwart social norms of small town Southern life regarding female

---

[127] Women's reaction to stress has only recently been studied as unique from men's reaction, and the finding is that women seek community while men seek solitude. Psychologist Shelley Taylor has reported that when women encounter stress, they seek out other women, "befriending, namely affiliating with social groups," as a means of coping with the stress (411). However, there are culturally appropriate ways in which women have learned to interact. In white culture, a woman seeks out friends who often assist by diverting from the problem, taking her mind off things; this is what Vivi does. In white culture, even if a mother would like tangible assistance or even honest discussion on an uncomfortable topic, this is often perceived as an imposition or overstepping of a boundary, especially if the issue relates to another woman's private home. Othermothering instead attempts to respond to the threat or fix the problem. Wells gives every indication that had the Ya-Yas been aware of Vivi's struggles, they would have attempted to help. Yet, due to the nature of their friendship and Vivi's presumptions about the purpose of friendship, she never seeks assistance. Taylor also reports that in addition to seeking out other women, "females respond to stress by nurturing offspring, behaviors that protect them from harm and reduce neuroendocrine responses that may compromise offspring health (the tending pattern)" (411). This research suggests that even if a mother is overwhelmed with her caregiving role, a natural way to reduce her stress is to interact with her children. One would therefore assume that since women's two primary means of coping with stress are nurturing children and engaging with other women, it would be stress relieving for a mother to receive assistance in her nurturance with the other women with whom she interacts. Yet, the harmful white myth that a good mother should be able to manage her household alone causes white women to have to choose between the two forms of stress relief (tending and befriending.)

propriety[128] and certainly know how to have a good time. Yet, though they often see one another, and the families they have created interact frequently, they do not seek to support one another in those roles, though all of them are mothers and face similar challenges. The Ya-Yas do not fail because they do not make Vivi happy enough. In fact, scholarship of othermothering and supportive kin and fictive kin networks never mention happiness as a defining element of the relationship. The Ya-Yas fail in supporting one another in their responsibilities of being wives and mothers, opting instead to simply live in the moment, specializing in drinking, dancing, playing cards, shopping, taking trips to the lake, and other amusements. While there is nothing wrong with enjoying oneself and relaxing, when a friendship is mostly centered on 'fun,' the weightier issues of life are often ignored.

It is not that women in white culture do not have networks; the issue is that the networks do not function in truly supportive ways. Although Wells writes a fictional account, the relationships she represents are indicative of reality. In a study she conducted in 1987, O'Connor reports that "only a tiny minority of the very close friendships actually provided high levels of practical help, while more than two-fifths were assessed as providing a high level of felt security" (61). This paradox of a close relationship without practical support perfectly describes the Ya-Yas: they care about one another and can count on one another as companions, but they typically neither ask for nor offer one another practical help or advice with their home or family. As O'Connor's study and Wells' text demonstrate, the enjoyment of a relationship is not always an indication of a supportive relationship for white women.

---

[128] Some examples of the Ya-Yas' unconventional behavior are their skinny dipping in the town water tower as teens and later at Spring Creek with their children as adults, their providing alcohol at their children's school function, and their endorsement of Teensy's strip teases at many of the parties they throw.

The complicated dynamic that othermothering must achieve is one in which other women interact with a mother's family but leave the mother feeling secure that she is not being replaced, and the children feeling that they do not need to compete with the other woman/women for their mother's love and attention. The Ya-Yas make it apparent to their children that their relationship centers on them rather than the families. This not only leaves the mothers emotionally isolated when a struggle arises within the family but also may leave the children feeling that their mother is being taken away from them. One way that the Ya-Yas' priorities becomes clear is through the parties they often throw or attend in which they hire a babysitter to watch the children and keep them away from the adult interaction. While there is nothing wrong with parents having time away from their children to socialize and unwind, the regularity with which this occurs suggests that the Ya-Yas interact with the children but in no way seek to assist each other in the rearing of their children.

Speaking of the ways that girls are able to benefit from interacting with additional mother figures, Collins says, "In contrast to the isolation of middle-class White mother/daughter dyads, Black women-centered extended family networks foster an early identification with a much wider range of models of Black womanhood, which can lead to a greater sense of empowerment in young Black girls" ("The Meaning" 54). Through interacting with othermothers, girls can see a range of ways that femininity can be enacted and have multiple sources of inspiration for how to live their own lives. However, because the Ya-Yas do not serve as models or mentors for the Petite Ya-Yas but instead function solely as companions for Vivi, Sidda often views them as inhibitors to her access to her mother. She references her mother's group of friends as a "coven" and admits, "Some days I would have split her wide open just to get the attention she gave the Ya-Yas. Some days I was so jealous I wished Caro, Teensy, and Necie dead" (28, 42). Sidda

feels that that she must compete with the Ya-Yas for her mother's love and attention. Although, of course, the Ya-Yas do have some positive influences on Sidda—though this seems to occur inadvertently rather than purposefully—she seems to feel that she must either choose them or her mother, rather than viewing them as a network that together help nurture her.

According to Collins, interaction with other women besides one's mother can successfully influence a girl, "The presence of working mothers, extended family othermothers, and powerful community othermothers offers a range of role models…" ("The Meaning" 53). However, the scenario Collins portrays can only occur when women purposefully seek to impact the family unit. The Ya-Yas feel no such obligation. In fact, they seem to recognize and even find humor in the fact that their friendship has not always been beneficial for their offspring. At Sidda's graduation party, Teensy offers "to pay for each and every Petite Ya-Ya to go into therapy" (39). Although Teensy is "fairly tipsy at the time" (39) which gives the comment a comic element, the implication is that the Ya-Yas' influence has not been positive on the children. Ironically, Sidda goes on to spend an extraordinary amount of time and money on therapy, much of it focused upon her fraught relationship with her mother.[129] Thus, Vivi's friendship with the Ya-Yas and Sidda's view of her mother's relationship with them adheres to

---

[129] As an example of white culture's typical inability to positively blend additional mother figures within a mother-daughter relationship, Adrienne Rich addresses the concept of a daughter being influenced by a woman besides her mother. However, she views the situation as one that only hurts the mother-daughter relationship:

> Many women have been caught—have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, and male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure...This splitting may allow the young woman to fantasize alternately as one of the other "mother," to test out two different identifications. But it can also lead to a life in which she never consciously resolves the choices…She has tried to break through the existing models, but she has not gone far enough, usually because nobody has told her how far there is to go. (247-8)

Rich interprets fictive kin relations between an older and younger woman as something that automatically pits the othermother against the biological mother. Furthermore, Rich believes that even if a daughter has a model in both a mother and an othermother, this does not provide a wide enough range of possible models for the daughter to truly understand the options available to her in life. What Rich does not address is why there can only be two, at most, influential females in a girl's life.

typical tenants in which mothers in white culture do not view their female friends as a support

for their family. Their children often not only do not see their mothers' friends as mentors but

instead may even view them as competitors for their mother's love and affection.[130]

Because Wells seeks to celebrate female friendship and to reconcile mothers and

daughters as a harbor within patriarchy, she does not explore shortcomings of the Ya-Ya

friendship. Instead, Vivi's husband, Shep, is critiqued for his unsupportive husbanding, as she

draws attention to the double standard regarding men and women's roles through the fact that

Shep is seldom present and never expected to parent to the same degree as Vivi. Wells

showcases the error of the mother held to such a high expectation. At one point Sidda admits,

"I've been so obsessed with my mother I guess I haven't paid much attention to Daddy" (329).

However, Wells does not appear to recognize that not only are patriarchal husband and wife

relations ineffectual in properly supporting the mother but, under white influenced beliefs

endorsing motherhood as a solitary enterprise, so too are female relationships.

Because the Ya-Yas mostly function as entertainment and companions for one another,

Vivi does not view her relationship with the Ya-Yas as capable of supporting her tumultuous role

as a mother. Her frustration escalates to her abandonment of her family. Upon arriving at the

---

[130] Wells portrays female friendship not only as unsupportive toward the family unit and specifically the mother-daughter relationship but rather something that actually moves the mother and daughter away from one another, which is somewhat typical of white culture. Psychologists Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach in their work *Between Women* address female friendship and claim that women seek in their friendships with one another that which is lacking in their own relationship with their mother. Though Eichenbaum and Orbach do make some insightful claims on the nature of female relationships, their conclusion that women need to be mothered by other women because they were not appropriately mothered by their own mother inadvertently highlights white culture's tendency to villainize mothers. Eichenbaum and Orbach do not specifically state that their analysis is one of white women. In fact, attempting to appear more universal, they actually state of their study on white women, "Although this is a particular group of women representative of a particular professional, class, and ethnic makeup, in many ways the issues… concern a multitude of women today" (199). While some of their ideas can be applied beyond white culture, it is important to note, as Eleanor Amico says of Eichenbaum and Orbach's work, "The discussions and examples… mostly reflect the lives of well-educated, middle-class women in the 1980s…" (374). Thus, the idea that tensions often occur in female friendships because there is a high level of need that women have and which goes unmet, reflecting the initial disappointment of the mother's failure, is one that specifically has bearing for white culture.

Gulf of Mexico after leaving her family, she walks along the shore and "did not miss my children for a moment" (277). While the Ya-Yas cannot be blamed for causing Vivi's issues, her problems may have never developed in the first place had the Ya-Yas been able to supportively interact according to tenants of othermothering. The Ya-Yas have fun together but do not appear equipped to tackle significant issues in empowering ways. After Vivi decides to abandon her family due to her exhaustion and frustration, she says, "Nobody knew where I was… Not even the *Ya-Yas*… I would have no roots. I would leave my husband, my children…even my best friends" (277). Vivi has no confidence in the Ya-Yas' ability to assist her in her time of crisis; yet, this is not due to their lack of intimacy. Wells writes of the proximity and comfortable physicality of the Ya-Yas' friendship, describing their lying together on a muggy porch hammock in adolescence as a "girl soup" and in reference to their friendship describes the "*girlness* of it all" (80, 81). In some ways, it appears that the naiveté of their early years of friendship fails to mature into a relationship that supports them in being empowered mothers. The Ya-Yas specifically support adolescent Vivi, from Caro telling Vivi's mother off after she sends her away to boarding school to the girls crying with Vivi as she mourns her lover about to leave for war (and later when they mourn his death.) Yet, the Ya-Yas seem more reluctant to encounter non-maternal obstacles. Although Vivi faces challenges in her life before motherhood, it is only once she becomes a mother that her life becomes too much for her to bear.

However, there is an exception to the Ya-Yas' lack of assisting with one another's families which occurs once a year when the Ya-Yas take their children to Spring Creek for the summer. Of these summers, Sidda says, "We were a communal tribe, a little primitive matriarchal village" (40). Separated from conventional society and even their husbands for three months, the Ya-Yas abandon mandates that mothers should only care for their own children and

instead adopt a group-oriented process in which they mother their own and each other's children. Sidda says, "They took turns being responsible for watching us as we splashed…" (34). Sidda mentions Spring Creek in her reflections in *Divine Secrets*, but even more information on these Ya-Ya summers comes from Wells' companion book *Little Altars Everywhere*.[131] Baylor, one of Vivi's other children, narrates a chapter that focuses on Spring Creek. He acknowledges the women's self-sufficiency apart from the men, as they find agency in their ability to do things for themselves, "They just take over, and they don't call Daddy or any servicemen to help, even though we do have a phone out there" (41). Of the othermothering culture, Baylor says, "At Spring Creek, Mama isn't the only Mama I have. I've got my pick of whatever Ya-Ya is around" (43). Although the Ya-Yas spend much time with each other's families throughout the year, summer times away from town are the only times in which they serve as othermothers. I would argue this is due to their separation from mainstream culture. Though she does not address othermothering, Patricia M. Gantt, scholar of Appalachian literature, agrees that the "Ya-Yas routinely incur the deepest community censure at their summer camp at Spring Creek: there they give themselves permission to dismiss convention to the greatest extent…With their husbands back in town, far from them and the children, the Ya-Yas dismiss all societally-imposed constraints" (166). The need to escape to a secluded, all female enclave in order for othermothering to be present seems to be a prerequisite only for white mothers.

---

[131] *Little Altars Everywhere* is advertised as a companion book to *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and together with *Ya-Yas in Bloom* make up the trilogy. *Little Altars* covers details from Sidda's life from childhood to age thirty-three, while *Divine Secrets* covers details from Sidda's life from childhood to age forty. However, the books do not read in chronological order and are not really chronological to one another; thus, none are truly sequels to one another but rather overlap many of the same time periods and even reference the same events from different perspectives or with additional details. *Little Altars Everywhere* was actually published first in 1992 but is now marketed as the second book in the series.

Though the Ya-Yas do throw off convention at Spring Creek, the result of their othermothering is not that they no longer take care of their children but that they share the responsibility and mother according to their own terms rather than those dictated by society. For example, the Ya-Yas continue to provide for their children physically but rarely cook, making cold sandwiches or roasting hotdogs over a campfire rather than fixing elaborate meals. The mothers also allow the children to learn to prepare their own food, fixing themselves cold cereal in the morning. And while clean clothes are always available, they are all mixed together in a large, communal bin from which the children find something to wear, rather than the mothers carefully ironing and color coordinating the outfits. Not only do the Ya-Yas love their time at Spring Creek, having been taken by their own mothers in their girlhood and continuing the tradition, but their children love it as well. Baylor says, "…Mama and the Ya-Yas are lots more fun without the men around. They don't wear makeup when we're at Spring Creek, just a dab of lipstick and toenail polish. And they don't use hairspray at all…They only cook when they feel like it…When Mama is at Spring Creek, she does only what she wants to" (40). The Ya-Yas' actions at Spring Creek suggest that it is not actually motherhood which has distressed Vivi; rather, it is the way that she feels she must enact motherhood within society and under her husband's gaze that becomes too much to bear. She has a little taste of how things could be during the summer, but upon arrival back at their home at Pecan Grove, everything goes back to white patriarchal standards, and eventually Vivi collapses under the pressure.

The men's visits to Spring Creek interrupt the 'summers only' matriarchal village the Ya-Yas create apart from dominant culture's expectations. Baylor notices: "But when Daddy and the other men come out for a weekend, the Ya-Yas start getting ready on Friday morning. Fixing little appetizers and tweezing their eyebrows, and Mama gets all nervous…she tells us exactly

what we can and can't tell Daddy about what we've been doing" (40). As further proof that it is not actually motherhood but dominant culture's expectations of motherhood which weigh down Vivi, Baylor's narration speaks volumes: "Mama leans back on the steps and says: I adore every single one of yall! I adore Spring Creek! This is how I was meant to live! No responsibility! I hate responsibility! And she laughs and leans her face back in the sun and says, Yall don't forget to put on your Coppertone! And Lulu, put that zinc oxide on your nose!" (43). Paradoxically, Vivi says she loves having no responsibility but then readily embraces responsibility for her children. It is not motherhood in and of itself that overpowers her; it is patriarchal white culture's expectations of good mothers. Vivi somehow believes that if she is relaxing with other women and sharing the responsibility of watching the children, she is avoiding her true obligation.

Vivi's breakdown occurs because the othermothering model under which she flourishes is not something routinely available in her life; without the support, she crumbles. Vivi's brief abandonment of her family occurs not during her annual summer stay with the Ya-Yas at Spring Creek but when she has been home at Pecan Grove. After Vivi returns from the Gulf, she resumes her roles of wife and mother and draws the will to keep going not from her husband or an effective female support system but from prescribed narcotics. Here Wells alludes to the 1950s epidemic of housewife dissatisfaction and subsequent overmedication. Friedan reports, "Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops" (31). When Vivi again becomes overwhelmed from the pressures of motherhood, she responds by beating her children, though she is too drugged to clearly remember the event. Afterward, she collapses and is briefly institutionalized. Part of Vivi's dismay stems from her husband, Shep, being gone so much of the time.[132] However, she also receives little help from either the Ya-Yas or her family. Vivi

---

[132] In *Little Altars*, Vivi speaks of her helpless situation: "Hell, I was just trying to stay alive. Four kids in four years and eight months, and a husband who did nothing but farm and duck hunt. Even when he was home, he wasn't

acknowledges her painful emotional isolation, even in the midst of her constant interaction with friends, "I couldn't even make myself talk to the Ya-Yas about how sick I was of my four little monsters. I did not want even my best friends to know how fed up I was. I tried once to explain to Caro" (261).[133] Reflecting back on the Ya-Yas' ineffectuality regarding Vivi's breakdown, Caro says, "It kills me to think I didn't spot her heading for the rocks. Friends are supposed to act like harbor boats—let you know if you're off course. But it ain't always possible, Pal" (300). What Wells never addresses is why it is not possible.

Vivi adheres to dominant culture's belief that being too deeply invested in community is a sign of weakness. In order to avoid potentially being negatively perceived by the Ya-Yas or appearing to need them more than they need her, Vivi veils her true needs. White culture is indeed one which has been negatively influenced by the historical lauding of individuality; ethnic groups within the U.S. tend to be much more group oriented, but they have not changed the tide of mainstream culture. Investigative journalist Sonia Shah and political activist Yuri Kochiyama state, "[I]ndividualism is a core Western value that neither class nor race appears capable of mitigating" (158). White individualism is only possible because those in dominant culture (which excludes, it is worth noting, whites who are poor, queer, and disabled) have rarely been in a position where they had to rely on others for survival or to work toward the acquisition

---

really here. Cook, clean, wash crappy diapers, wipe runny noses, listen to him run on about goddam drainage ditches. That's not what I was raised for, that's not why I was created! I am not a goddamn maid. I have a bachelor's degree from Ole Miss in Speech, not in Home-fucking-Ec. I used to be so much fun" (167).

[133] Apter and Josselson write that adolescents are the ones to most struggle with not revealing their true self to their friends, due to the fact that their sense of self is still being established and even changed. They state, "When we ache with the realization of not being the person we have convinced our friend we are, our problems reach back to those of adolescent friendships" (136). This is particularly applicable to the Ya-Yas' relationship because they have been friends since pre-adolescence. Vivi is not only ashamed of her feelings but is also ashamed to present an aspect of herself that her friends will find unfamiliar after all their years of friendship. The Ya-Yas' high regard for one another may serve negatively in Vivi's search to be honest. Apter and Josselson also say, "Girls who are widely admired and liked have the most to risk by seeking understanding and comfort for a sense of failure, or of misfit" (138). While Apter and Josselson are specifically analyzing girls, they apply this concept to Sylvia Plath, showing that it applies to women as well.

of rights. As a result, white women's alliances with other women tend to be rather superficial compared to ethnic cultures, where women support one another often. Collins explains the differences in white motherhood as contrasted with ethnic women's motherwork, "Themes of survival, power, and identity form the bedrock and reveal how racial ethnic women in the United States encounter and fashion motherwork" ("Shifting the Center" 49). The Ya-Yas' friendship at times ministers to needs, but they are typically not needs related to survival or even emotional health and well-being, and if they are, it is only for the women themselves rather than their associations with their families. Truly, they mostly minister to the desire for companionship. It may be for this reason the Ya-Yas are unsuccessful in, as Caro puts it, being able to "spot her heading for the rocks" (300). They are unused to moving past enjoying one another's company to assisting one another with serious familial concerns.

It is through Vivi's breakdown that the ineffectuality of the Ya-Yas truly becomes apparent. Even after her breakdown, Vivi is unable to receive the sort of support she needs from the Ya-Yas. She refuses to let them in on a deeper level than simply her girlfriends.[134] Caro confides to Sidda, "We tried to get her to talk about her breakdown, but she would not allow it. The most she would say is, 'I dropped my basket.' That is the phrase she made up to refer to the whole episode…What I regret the most is that none of us ever talked with you, Sidda—or Little Shep, Lulu, or Baylor. We hid behind some archaic belief that you do not interfere with another person's children" (305). Caro's recognition that she and the other Ya-Yas should have become involved with Vivi's children hints at recognition of the failure of a relationship between mothers

---

[134] While Vivi must be held responsible for failing to seek out assistance, she is acting based on cultural norms. In contrast, when I analyze *Beloved* later in this chapter, I will show how the women in the community initiate acting on behalf of Sethe through exorcising Beloved from the premises, despite the fact that Sethe isolates herself from them and does not seek their help. This showcases the cultural differences regarding beliefs of what a community of women's role is and suggests that there is an appropriate time to insist upon helping even when the one in need is incapable of asking or simply refuses to ask for such assistance.

that only emphasizes friendship but ignores familial support. This is the one moment in the text where Wells provides a critique of the Ya-Yas' friendship.

Vivi suggests the silence regarding her breakdown was mutually determined, providing a rather contradictory account of her return from institutionalization than Caro, who claims it was Vivi who would not address the issue. Vivi says, "When I came back from the hospital that nobody called a hospital, we said I had been tired, that I needed to rest. No explanation, ever. It was never discussed" (18). Acknowledging the lack of discussion surrounding her experience, Vivi also says, "I went over the edge years ago, and lived to tell the tale. Although not to many" (19). In this statement, Vivi emphasizes her own reticence, but the statement may also suggest the Ya-Yas' lack of persistence in asking questions. Though Caro and Vivi's accounts both suggest that something is amiss in their never going deeper in exploring Vivi's issues, it seems clear that none of the Ya-Yas view such raw honesty and vulnerability as coexistent with their type of relationship. Contemporary American Literature scholar Timothy Aubry[135] suggests that perhaps silence is important at times in relationships, "The novel's title suggests a group of friends whose bonds are based upon their secrets, but the paradoxical implication of Vivi's reticence is that kept rather than revealed secrets sustain close relationships" (79). While Aubry argues that the Ya-Yas maintain a close relationship because they avoid discussing potentially volatile topics, I disagree that the Ya-Yas benefit from keeping secrets; as is evident with Vivi, her kept secrets bar her friends from offering her the assistance and, later, the closure she desperately needs, causing her to constantly return to feelings of guilt rather than fully moving past the episode and being able to positively interact with her children, particularly Sidda. Selective reticence allows for a mostly conflict-free friendship but simultaneously fosters

---

[135] Specifically see his chapter "Therapy and Displacement in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*."

relations that are incapable of providing empowering support for the mother-daughter relationship.

The one exception is when Vivi, seeking to remember what she had done to her children, "made my best friend tell me what I did" (18). Perhaps this hard conversation shows that there is some degree of accountability in their relationship, as Caro's relating the abuse Vivi committed could propel her to view herself honestly and act differently in the future. However, this singular conversation occurs at Spring Creek, suggesting that this type of frankness regarding family matters only happens within a culture of othermothering, which is atypical in the Ya-Yas' relationship. Caro says, "Only once, when Vivi and I were alone one night, years later, at Spring Creek, did she talk about it. It was late and we'd been drinking gin. She made me describe to her exactly how I found the four of you kids that Sunday afternoon. She made me tell her everything—every single mark on each one of your bodies. She watched my every expression, my every eye movement, waiting for me to judge her. But I didn't. And I won't (305). Perhaps part of Caro's unwillingness to judge Vivi is an understanding that this may also require her to reflect upon what is lacking in their friendship. Othermothering endorses supporting the mother to properly provide for and protect her children; thus, if the mother's actions are detrimental to the children, another woman may need to hold the mother accountable, though this should be done empathetically. Sociologist Deborah K. King describes the othermothering role as "an ethic of caring and personal responsibility" (88). Othermothers believe themselves to have an obligation to uphold reciprocal accountability, believing that the mother should be able to account for her actions. In African American culture, "motherhood enables a voice regarding community concerns, while promoting, demanding, and modeling caring, self-respect, and thirst for justice" (King 90). Behaviors are most likely to be rectified if other women are willing to

serve as a moral compasses, regardless of how uncomfortable a situation this may create, while providing support to assist the mother in positive change.

The closest that the Ya-Yas come to supporting Vivi (in their hometown of Thornton rather than in the summer escape to Spring Creek) in a manner similar to African American culture is after Vivi is checked into a mental hospital: Caro, Teensy, and Necie take turns caring for Vivi's four children. However, she needs the assistance beforehand, when the crisis can possibly be averted. At this point, their assistance is literally a matter of survival for Vivi's family, similar to the way Collins describes African American mothers as "not only …mothering their own 'blood' children, but also…the children in their extended family networks, and those in the community overall" ("Shifting the Center" 56). However, only a small portion of the text covers the important section in which the Ya-Yas care for the Walker children, and there are very few specific details. When the topic is covered, the format is a series of letters which Sidda as a child writes to Vivi while she is away and letters which Vivi writes to the Ya-Yas afterward, thanking them. In her letter to Caro, Vivi says, "I pray that Siddalee and Lulu will find girlfriends half as loyal and true as the Ya-Yas" (296). However, although such sentiments show the depth of love that the Ya-Yas have for one another, Vivi's writing such formal thank you note may suggest that such intensive interactions are atypical for their relationship.

Rather than offering a critique of ineffectual mother support, Wells not only celebrates their inward focused friendship but also glamorizes the fact that the Ya-Yas are a poor influence on one another. Their motto, which they dutifully enact, is "Smoke, Drink, Never Think," which exacerbates Vivi's alcoholism (ix). It seems that because the alcoholism does not hurt the Ya-Yas' friendship, they do not view it as a problem. Furthermore, the Ya-Yas never consider that Vivi uses alcohol to fill a void in her life that could more appropriately be addressed through

helpful female support. Her addiction, emotional instability, and general dissatisfaction with life are presented as eccentricities of her personality rather than anything that has been exacerbated by society. This is not to say that Vivi's disappointment in her marriage and lack of worldly accomplishments would disappear, but consistent othermothering principles would certainly help her to more successfully mother her children, which is what triggers both her escape to the Gulf and her institutionalization. Caro recognizes but overlooks and even excuses Vivi's addiction,

> And, yes, your mother was an alcoholic. *Is* an alcoholic. I admit it. I know that has been hard for you, Sidda. I am not denying one bit of it.

> But of all the loony, imperfect souls you'll ever meet, Vivi Abbott Walker is one of the most luminous. When she dies, the remaining three of us will ache like part of our body has been cut off. (305)

While the Ya-Yas' non-judgmental attitude is commendable, they move beyond accepting to enabling, both making excuses and regularly assisting and joining Vivi in her addiction. They never hold her accountable for her actions or address how her alcoholism impairs her ability to mother well.

Though Vivi's alcoholism is an important element regarding the times she is unable to mother well, it is not the only factor; the alcohol compounds rather than instigates her depression. It is entirely possible that she is suffering from postpartum depression, as Vivi does have a baby at the time when she abandons her family and, according to nurse and health studies specialist Doris Noel Ugarriza, postpartum symptoms can occur up to one year from the birth (20). Actually, Vivi could very well be suffering from a series of postpartum depressions, as she "gave birth to four children…in three years and nine months" (42). "According to Stern and Kruckman (1983), postpartum depression is a culture-bound syndrome, produced by Western

industrialized societies like the United States" (Ugarriza 20). It may, indeed, be due to a lack of othermothering practices and female support networks. That postpartum depression is confined to the West suggests it is actually a socially induced sickness instead of the result of a woman's neurology or biology. As an analogy, female hysteria in Victorian times was believed to be caused by a woman's inferior biology. Today, we understand "hysteria" less as an issue rooted in female biology than the social, the result of woman's negative reactions toward stifling sexist social mores.

Scientist Colter Mitchell reports that some women are indeed genetically more predisposed to be negatively affected in the postpartum phase but that it is "greater exposure to stress, and weaker social support" which triggers postpartum depression, rather than the physical strain of pregnancy and childbirth or hormonal imbalances (8189). Mitchell's study suggests, "The biological susceptibility model posits that some individuals have greater genetic reactivity to stress, leading to worse outcomes in poor environments, but better outcomes in rich environments" (8189). In other words, even genetically susceptible mothers in othermothering networks could manage well but unsupported ones are more likely to develop postpartum depression. Further, it appears that race does not impact the likelihood of postpartum depression if the variables of communal support are equalized. Mitchell "ran separate models for white, black, and Hispanic subjects…and the findings were descriptively similar across groups" (8191). These findings suggest that though the issue has largely affected white women in Western cultures, white women are not simply more genetically predisposed to postpartum depression than women of color. The factor that seems to decide if women who are genetically predisposed to postpartum depression will actually develop the condition is communal support. White women

suffer most from postpartum because they are least likely to have othermothering support

systems.[136]

Commenting on U.S. society's lack of support for mothers, columnist Hillary Brenhouse

asserts, "This country is one of the only utterly lacking in a culture of postpartum care. Some

version of the lie-in [rest time provided for a new mother] is still prevalent all over Asia, Africa,

the Middle East, and particular parts of Europe…" (n.p.) This lie-in rest period is only possible

because the mother has support from other women who are willing to come in and assist with

household duties, infant care, and care for other children. This model is often unpracticed in the

U.S. due to the physical distance between female relatives (and often friends) as well as the

cultural inhibitions against offering and receiving help for household maintenance. The farthest

white women in dominant U.S. culture usually go in assisting a new mother is to drop off a meal

for the family or give a baby gift. Clinical nurse and academic Marilyn Fraktman references

Stern and Kruckman's study, saying, "Elements often observed in other countries/cultures

include protective measures such as social seclusion, mandated rest, and assistance with

household tasks from family and/or midwives" (94).[137]A mother can only allow herself to be

---

[136] There are additional theories besides my own which extend beyond scientific explanations for why women develop postpartum depression. For example, in her chapter "Childbirth and Depression" from *Electra vs. Oedipus*, psychoanalyst Hendrika C Freud argues, "Postnatal depression is preeminently a disorder that has to do with the mother-daughter relationship" (111). However, Freud's theory is one of mother blame, in which the mother is villainized for passing her own postpartum depression on to her daughter as well as the new mother blamed for enacting her own unresolved feelings toward her mother onto her baby girl. "The mother who has herself not had a satisfactory relationship with her mother tends to lean on her daughter. Usually this problem goes back several generations, and we see a failed separation along the female line, transmitted from mother to daughter" (122). Freud goes on to say, "The mother can easily fixate on a daughter whom she unconsciously confuses with the mother image for which she longs to intensely, so that the child becomes her mother's therapist" (122). While Freud aptly takes note of the important role a mother can play in her adult daughter's life after the delivery of a child, the emphasis is on how the mother has failed rather than on ways that the community fails the mother, which is my emphasis.

[137] Little research has been conducted besides Stern and Kruckman's study to argue that, as indicated by the fact that industrialized countries are the ones in which women suffer from postpartum, it is stress and a lack of support which causes the depression. Interestingly, scientists Lindsay M. Carini, Christopher A. Murgatroyd, and Benjamin C. Nephew conducted a lab experiment on lactating rats in which they simulated what, for them, would be social stress. Although certainly rats and humans are different, they report, "Exposure to chronic stress is a reliable predictor of depressive disorders, and social stress is a common ethologically relevant stressor in both animals and humans"

buttressed from the world for a time and permit herself to properly rest if there is a system of othermothering in place through which she knows that household and family needs are still being met. Although white culture has not adopted this important model of care, ethnic groups within the U.S. resist dominant beliefs and practices regarding isolated perinatal maternity. Brenhouse reports on how "immigrants to the U.S. and their children have found ways to observe a period of postpartum repose" (n.p.). While immigrants' lives are no less harried than their white counterparts, Brenhouse argues that immigrant women simply make nurturing a new mother a priority. If white culture were to follow suit in this prioritization, I believe we would begin to see mothers who are more confident in their mothering roles, less stressed and depressed, and more open to continuing the practice of communal mothering because they witnessed from the beginning of their child's life the positive impact that othermothering can make.

Unsupportive Female Relations Lead to Ruptured Matrilineage

In contrast to a strong kinship network of mother-daughter familial support during and after the postpartum phase, Wells' story chronicles a genealogy of complicated white mother-daughter relationships. If one interprets Vivi to suffer from postpartum depression, the fact that she receives no instrumental support (othermothering) from either the Ya-Yas or her family may directly relate to her breakdown. While Ugarriza's study reveals that the interviewed African American mothers "felt protected by their families" during the vulnerable time of caring for young children, such is often not the case in white culture, and Vivi's relationship with her own mother Buggy as well as her relationship later on with Sidda reflects this (26). Wells' text showcases daughters who feel aversion toward their mothers. Vivi recognizes the breach in her

---

(76). They find that postpartum rats did indeed suffer when a socially stressful environment was simulated. The implications of the test is that mammals tend to suffer maternal depression not simply from giving birth and caring for young but rather when acute stress for which the mother has no effective way to contend is presented.

relationship with her mother Buggy is also repeating itself with her daughter Sidda when she prays, "Let me see my daughter like my mother could never see me. Let her see me too" (20). Even as a girl Vivi yearns for her mother, despite their fraught relationship, "Vivi longed to run to her mother and bury her head in Buggy's lap. She longed to hold on to her mother and not let go" (209). She continues to feel the desire for closeness to her mother after having children, as is evidenced from her fairly regular interaction with Buggy. However, the encounters are always less than satisfactory, due to the nature of their relationship. Wells presents Buggy as resenting the time she spends with her grandchildren. When she babysits them, Buggy says insinuatingly to Vivi, "Buggy will stay home with your children…You go on and have a good time shopping with your girlfriends" (*Little Altars* 71). Buggy's assistance with Vivi's children is never freely given but instead always meant to cause Vivi to feel guilt. The villainization of Buggy's portrayal suggests mother-blame, though, upon closer inspection, her disapproval of Vivi's action stem from internalized ideas of how mothers should independently care for their families.

One of the primary reasons that white women helping to support mothers in the care of their children is so atypical is that white culture has often relied on African American women to mother its children. Stemming from the time of slavery, black women closely interacted with the white family, mitigating the need for white women to rely on one another. As enslaved women morphed into domestic workers after emancipation, little changed in the way that white and black women interacted, and little changed in the way white women interacted with each other. They served as social companions but did not offer or receive familial support from one another. White women continued to rely on women of color, rather than each other, to assist in childrearing. Domestic laborers are central to the way the Ya-Yas both are mothered as well as how they mother once they have their own families. Growing up, Vivi feels close with her

family's maid Ginger; then, once Vivi is herself a mother, she employs Willetta, to whom Sidda feels close. Vivi also periodically employs Melinda. It is not the Ya-Yas or female family members who intensively support Vivi as a wife and mother; rather, Vivi pays black women to assist her with her children and household. Though the text only specifically says that Teensy also uses domestic help,[138] one only assumes that the rest of the Ya-Yas do the same since this is the culture in Thornton.[139]

As an adult reflecting back on her childhood, Sidda recognizes the complicated relationship her family had with the black women they employed: "Of the countless cruelties of racism, Sidda thought, one is the unspoken rule that white children, once we reach a certain age, are supposed to renounce the passionate love we feel for the black women who raised us. We're supposed to replace it with a sentimental, patronizing affection. We're supposed to let the thinly veiled jealousy of our own mothers obscure what we feel for the women they hired as maids" (258). Sidda still feels love for Willeta though she believes she should instead simply be nostalgic toward her. She acknowledges, "My mother's life, my own life, would not have been possible without Willetta. What we owe her is so complex I'll never figure it out" (258). Wells consciously draws attention to the complexity and injustices of black women's societal place, showing times when the maids are cruelly treated or looked upon with racial diffidence. However, she only focuses on white mother's jealousy of their children's affection for the

---

[138] Wells references that Shirley is Teensy's family maid while she is a girl and that once Teensy is a mother, Shirley continues to serve as her maid (11, 239, 266).

[139] Trena Easley Armstrong reports on the prevalence of domestic workers in her Master's Thesis "The Hidden Help: Black Domestic Workers in the Civil Rights Movement." Armstrong states, "Both in the North and South, the demand for domestic workers remained steady in the 1950s." (19). Suggesting the high amount of black women who worked as domestics in the South, she also says, "By the 1960s, nearly ninety percent of black women in the South worked as domestic workers" (20).

domestics; the less obvious issue is how black women's oppressed roles ultimately impact white

female relations.[140]

In Vivi's case, she seldom relies on the Ya-Yas for assistance with her children or

provides them with assistance with theirs, relying instead on the low wage labor of black women.

Cultures in which true female intimacy occurs often centers around childrearing, housekeeping,

and the sharing of those duties. In the scene which culminates in Vivi temporarily abandoning

her family, she first admits her need for assistance with her children, "I longed for someone to

swoop down and take them off my hands for long enough to think one single thought without

interruption" (261). Yet, she calls on domestic help rather than even considering asking her

friends or family: First she asks Melinda, "I did not want to beg a colored person to help me, but

I couldn't help myself" (262). Then, she asks Wiletta, "'Don't tell me no, Willetta,' I said.

'Please don't tell me no'" (267). The Ya-Yas largely deflect the burden of supporting one

another in their domestic lives due to their reliance on black domestic workers.[141] Inadvertently,

---

[140] In certain ways, Wells appears to be making a conscientious attempt to critique the prejudice of the South. She negatively portrays Teensy's belligerent cousin who calls Ginger, Vivi's childhood maid, crass names. She also takes the time to show that Ginger and Willetta have lives and identities independent from their employers and employment. However, in "Bodies, Southern Nostalgia and the Construction of Whiteness in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood,*" popular culture critic Lori Robinson argues that Wells only addresses racism in superficial ways and actually advances a system in which blacks are used to further the purposes of whites. She claims that the domestics in the text ultimately function in order to show the goodness of the white women with which they come into contact or at the very least to serve as a fundamental experience that helps shape white women's identities. In regards to Sidda's memories of Willetta, Wells goes so far as to write that Sidda "ached for this woman who had been a mother to her" (258). However, Robinson insists that "Sidda's desire is presented through nostalgia for an authentic, bodily experience and Willetta, therefore, functions as little more than a vehicle for that nostalgia" (1129). Robinson also addresses Vivi's relationship with Ginger. Although Wells does address the cruel treatment Ginger receives due to her race, she does so within an anecdote focusing on the Ya-Yas' avoidance of conforming to traditional norms. Robinson argues that "Ginger's true function here is to show us that life is hard for the white girls because they will have to become white, southern, bourgeois 'ladies'" (1127). Based on what Robinson effectively argues, Wells' text, therefore, continues to use black women in exploitative ways. It is this very exploitation which allows for the comradery that the Ya-Yas share.

[141] Many white mothers today continue to rely on women of color rather than white women within their social circle for help with their families. In contemporary culture, working white mothers have replaced black mammies with poor immigrant women. According to Grace Chang in "Undocumented Latinas: The New 'Employable Mothers,'" women of color without citizenship accept abysmal pay for long hours as nannies out of desperation because it is one of the few jobs they can get, largely because few American born workers, privy to more options, would agree to such conditions. Therefore, the trend of white mothers seeking assistance from women outside their own white peer

this places white mothers in a precarious position. They do not allow themselves to view their maids as equals, and they certainly do not maintain a relationship of reciprocity. But, neither do they achieve true intimacy with other white women and mothers.

While the practice of employing domestics only allowed white women to interact superficially with one another, the need for a deep relationship remained. Therefore, not only did white women pay black women, albeit poorly, to meet the physical requirements of othermothering but they also at times looked to them for emotional support that othermothering provides. In her work *Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers*, sociologist Judith Rollins explains, "[W]omen without careers or companionship needed the most from their domestics" and that in addition to help with housework and childcare there existed "the need for her domestic to function as her friend" (119,121). As the Ya-Yas are close friends, Vivi's relationship with her domestic does not reflect the reality of many lonely, white, female employers relying on their African American employees for companionship. However, Wells does touch on Vivi's expectation of Melinda to go beyond being a worker to someone concerned with her emotional well-being. After Melinda refuses to give up her forthcoming job as a nurse for a postpartum mother to work longer for Vivi, for whom she has already served for three months after the birth of Vivi's fourth child, Vivi takes Melinda's leave personally. Despite her distress at losing Melinda's tangible support, Vivi feels hurt that Melinda does not feel an emotional connection to her and her family. After dropping Melinda off at her home and seeing her happiness at being reunited with her own family, Vivi complains, "You could tell from the tone of her voice that she had forgotten all about me and my children. Like we did not exist"

---

group or extended family continues. Chang puts perspective on the continued domination via whiteness in saying that "the advances of many middle-class, white women in the work force have been predicated on the exploitation of poor, immigrant women" (261).

(264). She goes on to admit, "I knew it didn't make a grain of sense, but my feelings were hurt. If Melinda was going to walk off and abandon me like that, then the least she could have done was to invite us in for a minute" (265). Vivi expects Melinda to treat her like a friend despite the reality of their relationship being that of privileged employer and disadvantaged employee. Though Vivi values and enjoys her friendship with the Ya-Yas, she still feels a need for Melinda to provide not only physical but also emotional labor for her and her family, which suggests that she has emotive needs the Ya-Yas are not meeting. Vivi may desire emotional labor from Melinda because she does not feel she must impress her; she can be authentic with Melinda, revealing her needs in a way that she may be less inclined to do with her peers.

Most research focusing on women of color's contribution to white families emphasizes how children and families of color are deprived of the presence and energy of the mother because that woman is mothering elsewhere. For instance, Sau-ling C. Wong, author of "Diverted Mothering: Representations of Caregivers of Color in the Age of Multiculturalism," introduces the term "diverted mothering," which she describes as "time and energy available… diverted from those who, by kinship or communal ties, are their more rightful recipient" (69). While this is an important dynamic to recognize, less analyzed is the impact that reliance on domestic workers has on white women's engagement with each other. The system not only hurts black families, but it hurts white women's alliances as well.[142] Vivi diverts assistance in her mothering role away from those with close kinship ties to her, such as her mother Buggy, or those with close communal ties, such as the Ya-Yas, onto Willetta and Melanie. Wells shows such diversion to be of Vivi's own accord, "I could have called Mother to baby-sit, but I didn't

---

[142] Additional research could be conducted on the negative ways that white women's dependence on their black maids rather than having a co-partnership with their husbands negatively affected their marriages, but that is beyond the scope of my analysis.

want to see that constipated look of blame on her face when she asked me why I couldn't just cook supper at home" (266). Because white culture generally has inflated a rupture in the mother-daughter relationship, Vivi avoids seeking caretaking assistance from her mother.[143] Sociologist Dawn Marie Dow reports, "Some ethnographic research suggests that White middle-class mothers often refuse child-care support from kin, and, if they do accept help, they resist viewing such arrangements as permanent…" ("Integrated Motherhood" 184). Vivi aligns with white culture's hesitancy to rely on family. In so doing, she preserves her sense of independence but also falls prey to a narrative that stresses dissonance rather than support amongst white women.

Vivi resists assistance from her mother in alignment with Buggy maintaining emotional distance. Although Buggy does not work and lives nearby, she opts to help Vivi by sending her maid rather than going herself. Vivi reports, "If things got too bad, Mother would send Ginger over, and sometimes Ginger's granddaughter, Mary Lee…It wasn't enough. Nothing was enough" (266). This absence of direct support between adult mother and daughter, which is instead mediated via a black woman, is historically accurate. Rollins reports on white kinships ties' dependence on domestics, "[M]others in close proximity 'loaned' their help to their daughters" (98). Mothers who lived far away at times did the same. A white mother sending her maid rather than coming herself to help suggests that she may be uncomfortable interacting in

---

[143] Vivi's relationship with Buggy is portrayed as part of a legacy of mother-daughter tension. Since her girlhood, Vivi has never been close to Buggy, who is portrayed as an antagonistic force against which Vivi must contend. However, Buggy also had a negative relationship with her mother, and this works its way down into her own relationship with Vivi and also has implications for Vivi's relationship with Sidda. Wells does the opposite of celebrating the matrilineal line; perhaps this is in part because the women simply take one another for granted. They turn each other into the enemy; the further into the past one goes, the worse the women are: Vivi may be at times a poor mother to Sidda, but Buggy was worse to her, and Delia was even worse to Buggy. While on one hand the text seems to critique mother-blame, Wells explains each woman's downfalls as the product of her mother's influence, therefore inserting mother-blame into the text. The moral of the matrilineal focus seems to be to escape one's mother and be as different from her as possible.

such a fashion even with her own daughter, perhaps because she has not intimately interacted in the mundane and intimate details of housekeeping and childrearing since her daughter was a child. While Buggy's aloofness in supporting her daughter's maternal role is an example of unsuccessful othermothering in white culture, it is, unfortunately, normal and indicative of a lack of intimacy in the mother-daughter bond. Sidda's decision not to reproduce may be somewhat rooted in her desire to break the cycle of mother-daughter dysfunction. However, it may also be unconsciously motivated by her acknowledgment that she does not have a strong support network of female friends, "girlfriends to hold her hands," or a strong relationship with her mother on which to rely in undertaking a mothering role (115). Rather than viewing her maternal line as something empowering and worth passing on, Sidda questions, "Was there a viscous glue of jealousy passed down from mother to daughter in our lineage, invisible and life-threatening as cancer?" (178). Sidda appears to long for children on some level, "She wanted to be part of a family. How was it that she was forty years old and she had created no family of her own?" (142). However, her resistance to maternity may stem from wanting to avoid being an unsupported mother, as her career as a director requires much of her time, and she would undoubtedly require strong support networks to successfully be able to raise a child. Othermothering practices typically support working mothers, but Sidda does not have familiarity or access to such practices. While minority cultures draw deeply from empowering female kinship and fictive kinship ties, Wells' text, indicative of white culture, includes only surface level relationships regarding female networks of both kinship ties amongst Buggy, Vivi, and Sidda and fictive kinship ties amongst the Ya-Yas.

Wells portrays the Ya-Yas as an endearing female network, full of sass, pizazz, and love. However, beneath the fun-loving friendship, one finds that the Ya-Yas are a network that does

not function as a support system for the challenges of motherhood, the strain of which results in Vivi's depression, addiction, and anxiety. Furthermore, they are either unable or unwilling to assist in any true restoration within the mother-daughter relationship; in fact, Wells portrays female friendship serving as a substitute for a productive mother-daughter relationship. Rather than addressing familial issues, Vivi largely interacts with the Ya-Yas as a way to bypass her relationship with her own mother as well as her daughter. The Ya-Yas both distract Vivi from acknowledging her poor relationship with her mother Buggy and often draws her away from her responsibilities with her own children during her early years of mothering. Later, their relationship keeps her from keenly feeling the loss of a close connection with her daughter once Sidda is grown. Perhaps it is because of the Ya-Yas that Wells allows for little support and no friendship within the various mother-daughter pairs.

Wells ends the novel with Vivi and Sidda making peace but does not attempt to imagine what their relationship could look like beyond this; she does not show the women's patterns of communication after their reconciliation or their interacting in a relationship of trust and problem solving. Indeed, Vivi and Sidda only repair their relationship in superficial ways, the result of which is, ultimately, Sidda's marriage to Connor, rather than a deepened relationship with her mother or other women. Wells' text only patches the mother-daughter relationship as a means to a marriage rather than as a worthwhile end in and of itself. It would not be enough for restoration between mother and daughter to conclude the novel because most readers would perceive this relationship as only peripheral in comparison to that of a love interest. Thus, the novel shows progress of a sort but simultaneously shows problems within the way white culture continues to think about motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship, even amidst a conscious attempt to represent reconciliation. Although Vivi and Sidda do mend their

relationship, it is basically resolved through the women choosing to forget rather than address the past that has caused friction between them. The relationship is repaired through Sidda's acceptance that she will never be privy to her mother's past. Wells writes that Sidda "gave up the need to know, and she gave up the need to understand. She sat next to her mother, and felt the power of their combined fragility. She returned home without blame" (347). While it is certainly true that no person can ever be completely understood by another and perhaps especially true that parents can never be completely separated from their role as life and caregiver when viewed by their children, it is quite problematic to posit that the only way a mother and daughter can reconcile is by one or both parties to give up knowing and understanding one another. Such beliefs only further poor relationships between mothers and daughters in white culture. Unfortunately, Wells' depictions of both kinship and fictive kinship female networks are not anomalies but can be viewed as a representation of white women's relationships due to the influence of white culture's expectations about motherhood.

Female Solidarity through the African American Practice of Othermothering in Morrison's *Beloved*

If *Divine Secrets* is an example of a lack of influential female community and its impact on mothers and motherhood, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987) is just the opposite, containing a strong theme of female solidarity, specifically reinforced via the matrilineal line. The two books were published within nine years of one another, so they can be said to represent the ideologies of a similar time period. *Beloved* is a key text in contemporary academia, and there is scholarship addressing the practice of othermothering in *Beloved*, much of which identifies the African and African American roots of such enactments. While slavery has been a key factor in women's supporting one another and this historical reality is reflected in

Beloved, African culture has long valued this model even predating slavery. Ugarriza notes, in "Social Support Unique to African American Mothers," although slavery and ensuing racism have undoubtedly reinforced concepts of the importance of community, communal strength was already valued by Africans (21). Herbert Gutman agrees, having conducted one of the most extensive studies on fictive kin relationships within black communities which predate slavery. Thus, *Beloved* speaks to a history of female support systems which existed before slavery in Africa, though it continued at least in part as a response to slavery in the U.S.

Not only does Morrison's emphasis on othermothering through kin and fictive kin ties have a rich African history but it also has important relevance to African American relationships today, showing that the culture of othermothering that Morrison highlights is not just a historical occurrence but a continued cultural value and practice. While this is, in part, due to continued racial oppression, it is also very likely due to an intentionally preserved value. Linda M. Chatters explores relationships in the article "Fictive Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families" and reports that two out of three African Americans testify to having a fictive kin member (299). Thus, regardless of the fact that both *Divine Secrets* and *Beloved* are set, at least in part, in the past, just as Wells' text can be read as a reflection of contemporary practices regarding white female alliances, so can Morrison's text be read as indicative of contemporary practices regarding black female alliances. Although slavery is no longer the catalyst for cultivating such relations, research shows that African American culture continues to foster the traditional elements of fictive kin relationships. It is worthwhile to contrast *Beloved* with a white-authored and white-centered text that has been heavily influenced by contemporary Western ideologies in order to identify that Morrison' story is not only a product of African American culture but also a resistance against white normatization in its celebration of ethnic values and practices.

In *Beloved,* Morrison chronicles the life of the protagonist Sethe, a woman who escapes from slavery and begins a new life in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she works as a cook to provide for herself and her teenage daughter Denver. The central conflict emerges as Paul D, a figure from her past, arrives and kindles a romance with Sethe almost synonymously to the arrival of a mysterious young woman named Beloved, whom Sethe takes in as her own. Sethe comes to believe that Beloved, now a grown woman, is the infant daughter she killed rather than allowed to be taken into slavery. Through Beloved's presence, Sethe learns to deal with the past, pass on her history to her daughter Denver, and forgive herself so that she can reenter the community and have hope for the future.[144] While much of the narrative centers on Sethe and her daughter's relationship with one another, Morrison is careful to provide Sethe with a history of her own. The matrilineal line which is so flawed in *Divine Secrets* is something that characters in *Beloved* come to value over time. The novels share the important similarity of mothers suffering from isolation and wanting to keep their history from their daughters. Yet, the important difference in *Beloved* is that the community of women rises to support Sethe as a mother, and she and Denver come to value the mother-daughter bond.

In looking at how African American culture has viewed matrilineage, Heather Ingman, whose research is on the mother-daughter relationship in twentieth-century women's fiction, claims that black women "struggle to affirm the value of their lives: race, class, and gender oppression intensify their need to uncover a strong matrilineal heritage" (28). The emphasis on uncovering the motherline, which has served as a source of empowerment and support in the face of racism and patriarchy, is important; as has often been the case in African American culture

---

[144] Although Beloved and Sethe's interactions could be analyzed as that of mother and daughter, because I am interpreting Beloved as a manifestation of slavery's collective past, she is more a symbol than a physical daughter. In fact, in many ways, Beloved is actually the mother to Sethe because Beloved represents the matrilineal line. Thus, my analysis of the mother-daughter relationship will be limited to Sethe and Denver.

under the yoke of slavery, the motherline is ruptured as families rarely spent time together and were often violently separated through sales of enslaved people. However, the community, specifically through women's practice of othermothering, not only sought to alleviate alienation and emotional isolation by supporting biological family ties but also created similar connections through fictive kinships. One scholar who has specifically analyzed *Beloved* as a text endorsing othermothering, Yin-Li Yu, says, "The black motherline and matrilineage in Morrison's *Beloved* have been constantly violated and disrupted under their different circumstances, but simultaneously there is the working of repair and recovery undertaken by the act of othermothering" (147-8). This othermothering comes from a variety of places.

One woman who assists in repairing matrilineage is Nan. Because Sethe's mother, who is unnamed, is forced to go back to the fields shortly after giving birth, Sethe actually spends more time with Nan than she does her own mother. As Nan is physically maimed and unable to work in the fields, she serves as a nanny and wet nurse to the enslaved children (as well as the white children.) While Nan does provide nurturance, she does not try to replace Sethe's mother; rather, she seeks to pass on knowledge of her mother to Sethe because she realizes how important it is for a daughter to know and understand her mother. Rather than encouraging Sethe to accept the fact that there is much about her mother she cannot know, as the Ya-Yas do with Sidda,[145] Nan gives Sethe as much information as possible about her mother. "Telling you. I am telling you,

---

[145] Although Vivi sends her daughter the scrapbook of her life and its intersection with the Ya-Yas, most of it remains a mystery to Sidda. Even when the Ya-Yas visit Sidda and briefly look over the book, they offer none of the details they possess to help her uncover details of Vivi's past. Teensy claims, "There's a lot in this book" and Caro counters, "There's a lot that isn't in that book," but that is all (286). The pictures, scribbled notes and news-clippings provide an extremely limited story of Vivi's experiences. Rather than expanding this limited view, the Ya-Yas' visit to Sidda emphasizes the theme of learning to accept and even condone aloofness and secrecy. When Sidda asks, "Why didn't she come herself? Why doesn't she—why hasn't she told me this story herself?" Caro simply responds, "Because…That's all: because" (301). The Ya-Yas serve as enforcers of Sidda's ignorance concerning her mother.

small girl Sethe" Nan says, and what she shares with Sethe is that her mother refused the children she conceived through rape at the hands of white men (74). Sethe is the only one she keeps because she loves her father, "She threw them all away but you…You she gave the name of a black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around" (74). Nan passes on to Sethe knowledge of the choices her mother made in the midst of a situation where little choice was available. She passes on to Sethe knowledge of her mother's agency in the midst of oppression. Interestingly, Morrison offers no information about the nature of the relationship between Nan and Sethe's mother. Although one would assume there must be some type of bond for Nan to know such intimate details, Morrison makes no allusion to friendship, showing the potential difference in the purpose of friendship and the purpose of othermothering. Slavery afforded little opportunity for such outlets; therefore, their relationship is an intimate one based upon survival and preservation of heritage.

Othermothering practices are not always understood by daughters. Regarding Sethe's response to the shared information about her mother, Morrison writes, "As small girl Sethe, she was unimpressed. As grown-up woman Sethe, she was angry, but not certain at what" (74). It is no wonder that as a child, Nan's words mean little to Sethe. The content is too adult in nature; however, Nan realizes that she must tell Sethe while she has the chance because they may be parted at any time the slave master desires and then Sethe may never know about her mother. Nan, as an othermother, sees it as her responsibility to enable Sethe to know about her mother so that she can more fully know about herself. As an adult, Sethe experiences anger associated with her limited knowledge of her mother, though she is unsure at what or where to direct it, which may well be her frustration of not being allowed to have fostered more of a relationship with her mother, to not have been allowed to know more of her. It is noteworthy that Sethe feels this

anger when she is attempting to tell Beloved and Denver about their grandmother. In trying to provide her daughters with their history, she realizes how many gaps are in it due to the gaps in her own. Morrison's purpose in portraying these ruptures in the mother-daughter relationship contrast with those in *Divine Secrets*. Wells' text, as a representation of white ideologies, suggests that ruptures in mother-daughter understanding are unavoidable and it is other women's responsibility to help the daughter accept this reality. Contrastingly, *Beloved*, as a representation of African American ideologies, suggests that ruptures in mother-daughter understanding is a vast loss and that it is other women's responsibility to help daughters know their own matrilineal line however possible.

Looking at female support networks, Nan is not the only other woman to sustain Sethe; Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, also serves as an othermother to Sethe. The two women look at each other not as in-laws but as family, though, of course, under slavery there is not even a legally-recognized marriage. When Sethe arrives at Bluestone 124 after having fled Sweet Home, "Baby Suggs kissed her on the mouth" as a mother kisses her child (109). Then, she carefully bathes Sethe in sections, the way a mother bathes a small child, careful not to miss an area or let soap get where it should not. When Sethe's injuries startle her, Baby Suggs, like a caring mother, tends to her but does not allow her to see her alarm, which would only instill fear in Sethe. Instead, "Baby Suggs hid her mouth with her hand" (109). Though Sethe is not a child, she still needs nurturance. Baby Suggs' cultivating presence is of vital importance, not only because of the ordeal Sethe has been through, but also because of the loss of her own mother. Baby Suggs, likewise, mothers her grandchildren. She tends to her family with jealous watchfulness, and it is of no wonder, for, as Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard write, "Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the 'guardians of the generations'" (47). As an

othermother, Baby Suggs guards her family with vigilance because they are the legacy she will leave behind.[146] The strength of this othermother relationship (through the kinship ties of in-laws) between Baby Suggs and Sethe is in stark contrast to Wells' work, which portrays the matrilineal line as something oppressive and flawed. Perhaps because once they reach adulthood, white women do not typically need one another for physical survival, they do not recognize other types of need they may have for one another. Yet, this individualistic mentality makes it difficult to recognize and ask for help.

Morrison portrays Baby Suggs as a non-judgmental figure toward Sethe. As situations beyond Sethe's control (which Morrison is critiquing) have impacted her actions, Baby Suggs does not need to hold Sethe accountable in the ways the Ya-Yas need to hold Vivi accountable for beating her children. Not only does she not blame Sethe for running away without Halle, her own son, but Sethe feels no hesitancy toward Baby Suggs; she does not wonder whether she will believe her to have abandoned Halle. Their encounter is as follows:

> "What do you think happened to him?"/"I don't know", said Sethe. "He wasn't where he said to meet him at. I had to get out. Had to." Sethe watched the drowsy eyes of the sucking girl for a moment then looked at Baby Suggs' face. "He'll make it. If I made it, Halle sure can."/ "Well, put these [earrings] on. Maybe they'll light his way." Convinced her son was dead, she handed the stones to Sethe. (111)

---

[146] This model of familial assistance provided through the grandmother is one which is still practiced in African American culture today. Karin L Brewster and Irene Padavic explain that middle and upper middle class black mothers use kin-care, specifically provided by the grandmother. Dow speculates on the implications of the research, "[W]hile one might assume the use of kin-care is connected to a mother's access to material resources and options, or lack thereof, Brewster and Padvick's research suggests that African-American middle-class mothers prefer kin care and that non-material motivations may partially explain this preference" ("Black Moms and 'White Motherhood Society'" 18). Probably lower class African American women use grandmothers for kin-care less because those women have to work out of financial necessity. Thus, using African American culture as a contrast, white women's hesitancy or inability to heavily involve family members, specifically the grandmother, in child rearing assistance is not the norm cross-culturally.

In her strong assertion of why she had to leave, Sethe seems to feel she must justify her actions—but only to herself. Based on Baby Suggs' gentle response, Sethe's strong rhetoric appears unneeded for her mother-in-law. Furthermore, Baby Suggs, though she believes her son to be dead, does not blame Sethe. Instead, she allows Sethe to continue hoping because she recognizes her need for hope.

Another example of the strength of Sethe and Baby Suggs' relationship is evident in Baby Suggs' response to Sethe's act of infanticide: "'It's time to nurse your youngest,' she said. Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go" (179). Baby Suggs does not attempt to step in and replace Sethe as a mother, regardless of the fact that Sethe has just killed one of her children. Furthermore, Baby Suggs resists condoning or exonerating Sethe's actions.[147] She simply continues in her supportive role to Sethe, a support that also leads her to challenge Sethe's actions with her baby, Denver, since Baby Suggs knows Sethe is still in shock: "Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table and shouted, 'Clean up! Clean yourself up!'" (179). Such a command implies direction but not judgment. Baby Suggs does not want to take away Sethe's right to nurse. Instead, she seeks to shake Sethe out of her stupor in this moment, to remind her that she has a child who is still alive and who needs her. Baby Suggs is willing to heavily involve herself, setting aside decorum and fear of overstepping her boundaries for the welfare of Sethe's children, "They fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they fought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when she slipped in a red puddle and fell" (179). Such a conflict shows not animosity but a highly shared investment.

---

[147] The difference between Baby Suggs not holding Sethe accountable for her act of infanticide versus the Ya-Yas not holding Vivi accountable for her alcoholism stems from the fact that Sethe will not again repeat her behavior, as the same situation will not again unfold where this is even a possibility once Sethe is imprisoned for her crime and slavery is made illegal, while Vivi's behavior has been and continues to be habitual.

Perhaps Morrison's strongest portrayal of female fictive kin relationships in *Beloved* occurs through the community of women who live near Bluestone Road. For much of the book, Sethe is at odds with the community. After Baby Suggs throws a party in celebration of Sethe and her children's safe arrival out of slavery, the community becomes jealous of the abundance of Baby Suggs: "Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (163). Due to this "free-floating repulsion," the community decides not to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe that schoolteacher is on his way to their house to take Sethe and her children back to slavery (163). Stamp Paid, one of the members of the community loyal to Baby Suggs, reflects, "Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness—that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house…" (185). The devastating consequence is Sethe's decision to kill her children rather than have them returned (though she only succeeds in killing one, her "crawling already?" baby.)

Though African American culture has a heritage of positive support amongst community members, Morrison acknowledges times when the community falls short. However, she clearly shows this isolation to be detrimental for the one abandoned, and she also indicates that those who do the abandoning participate in unjust conduct. Because Baby Suggs sees herself as a part of a community, one which she has nurtured as a mother does her young, she is hurt beyond repair at their betrayal: "[T]o belong to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy" (209). This betrayal is experienced as an emotional isolation that affects both Sethe

and Baby Suggs. As an othermother to the black community, Baby Suggs gained agency through nurturing, reflecting, as Collins argues, that "[m]otherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother, can be invoked by Black women as a symbol of power" ("Shifting the Center" 55). However, all of Baby Suggs' agency is eradicated through the community's betrayal in her family's time of greatest need. Rather than supporting the mother-daughter bond that exists between two women, the community aids in its severance. Though Morrison shows the strength of community othermothers through Baby Suggs, she ultimately allows this character to be defeated, perhaps showing that even a communal matriarch is capable of withstanding only so much. Morrison highlights the African American value system of community support, especially amongst its women, and shows the potentially dire consequences when this is abandoned.

Sethe reacts much differently than Baby Suggs to the community's meanness. She responds with the same diffidence she has been shown. Morrison shows the error of both Sethe and the community's interactions, which divides rather than supports and draws together: "[N]obody…would enter 124—an injury Sethe answered with another…That insult spawned another by the mourners…So, Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation, and spite" (202). Sethe's "self-sufficiency" causes division not only with the community but also with her own daughter Denver (202).

Until Beloved functions as a catalyst for change, Sethe and Denver's relationship is an isolated one in which they exist independently from the rest of the community. As important as the mother-daughter relationship is, even the best relationship is not mean to function in isolation. The strain on Sethe and Denver's relationships is apparent when Denver confesses, "I

230

can't live here, I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by…/It's not the house. It's us! And it's you!" (17). Dana Heller, social critic and literary feminist, claims, "Morrison suggests that a family closed off from caring relationships with nonkin is a family to be consumed…" (130). It is Denver's reaching out to the community once she realizes that Sethe is losing herself to Beloved that actually initiates the healing of Sethe and the community. Once Denver shows herself to be vulnerable and in need of help, as opposed to proud and self-sufficient, community women begin leaving dishes of food which Denver then later returns. Nancy Jesser, author of "Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" explains, "Once the house and its inhabitants are brought back into the compass of the community by Denver's escape, the boundary established on the day Sethe hurled the world out can be re-negotiated" (340). Because of the town women's interaction with Denver, they then begin to rekindle a regard for Sethe, who has long isolated herself from the community due to their earlier betrayal which resulted in her killing of her "crawling already?" baby girl.

The community women take up responsibility for the well-being of not only Denver but also Sethe. Due to her desire to reconcile with the past, Sethe is being consumed by her relationship with Beloved. She caters to Beloved's every need, becoming so singularly focused on Beloved that she has stopped going to work; indeed, she does nothing but give undivided attention to Beloved, who becomes large while Sethe shrinks, giving all sustenance to Beloved. Regarding the community women's change of heart, Morrison states, "Maybe they were sorry for her [Denver]. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long" (294). Although all the women are involved in the expelling of Beloved, Ella serves as a more

prominent figure than the rest, being highlighted as a supportive influence. Morrison narrates, "It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order" (301). Due to Ella's own previous act of infanticide, she understands Sethe' past and from this understanding seeks to support her.

The thirty women who come to Bluestone 124 to intervene on behalf of Sethe obtain power through their number. Their plan of action is somewhat unclear, yet Morrison seems to suggest that the plan may simply be to show their support through vocalization. They, in a sense, speak for Sethe when she is unable to speak for herself. The women stop before getting close to the house and pray aloud. There are "earnest syllables of agreement" (304). Morrison highlights the union of the women's intercession: "[T]he voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (308). Morrison does not allow us to know if the women's vocalized support would have been enough to expel Beloved. Bodwin enters the scene and Sethe prepares to attack, thinking him to be coming to take her child. However, Bodwin's entrance allows for the women to act. Though Denver is "the first one [to] wrestle her mother down," other community women do the same (313). Denver's ability to help protect her mother stems from her realization that her mother is human and in need of assistance. Morrison simultaneously evokes the importance of female community and family (specifically the matrilineal line), showing that a functional community will support the family and a functional family will interact with the community. As Heller puts it, "*Beloved* explores this vital connection between the biological family and fictive relations as necessary for blacks' survival" (134). Denver's

confidence in being able to act regarding her mother stems from the way she has been mentored by the community women of which she, on the brink of womanhood, has now joined.

The community of women caring about Sethe's well-being allows her to move toward restoration; she is only able to function adeptly as a mother once she has been supported by other women. Psychologist and literary critic Stephanie Demetrakopoulos argues, "Perhaps only through other women…can we women traverse the stages of mothering. Mothers need community, fellow travelers" (16). However, while Morrison focuses on the restoration available to Sethe once she again partakes in community, specifically female community, the relationship portrayed is far from that of a casual friendship. If contrasted with the giggling girlfriends of Wells' Ya-Yas, there is little resemblance. The female solidarity in Morrison's text appears to be more substantial; as Demetrakopoulos persuasively argues, "The community of women who heal Sethe is Morrison's tribal metaphor that confronts and defies the way that American culture so denigrates, so desacralizes motherhood. Only a mother knows the cost of mothering" (16). Sethe's relationship with the community women, unlike the Ya-Yas, is not based upon the superficiality of small talk and diversions from housewifery but rather on women coming together to save one another from collapsing under the weight of a racist and sexist society and the often overwhelming demands of motherhood.

Yet even with the support of the community women, it is possible that Sethe will continue to struggle. The book ends portraying Sethe dangerously close to giving in to the sort of breakdown Vivi collapses underneath. Sethe's eyes are expressionless and she sings to herself while confined to her bed (319). Vivi's breakdown is the event that culminates in her beating her children and being admitted into a mental ward, an experience from which she is never able to completely recover. Sethe's breakdown, in contrast, appears to be a catharsis from which she can

233

emerge stronger. Morrison hints at Sethe's recovery through Paul D's proclamation, "Sethe…me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322). One notices that despite the emphasis on female community within the text, the ending offers the hope of a romantic relationship between Paul D and Sethe. This counters critics such as Deborah E. McDowell who in "Reading Family Matters" argue that Morrison, along with most contemporary black women authors, only portray families with absent male figures. While men are mostly absent in the text, Morrison does this to represent a historical reality rather than an optimal situation. Africana studies professor Marquita Marie Gammage addresses a misconception, "The enduring stereotype of the Black female matriarch has dominated social, political, and economic beliefs about Black women. She was seen as crippling to the Black man, thus standing in direct opposition to his manhood" (10). Undoubtedly aware of this stereotype, Morrison expertly writes about a redemptive female support network but simultaneously avoids promoting a model of women who have no place for men in their lives and families. Morrison shows that female community has an important place not only in the absence of men but in their presence as well. The novel's ending contains hope, suggesting that Sethe can simultaneously undergo personal restoration along with beginning to foster positive relations with the community women and a romantic relationship with Paul D.[148]

Although the future is one of hope, since the text ends before Sethe completely recovers, readers are unable to know how exactly Sethe will interact with the community of women from this time forward. Even if she continues to remain in community, based on the scars of her past, it is doubtful that she will become best friends with anyone. However, even disregarding Sethe's

---

[148] Morrison including the promise of a romantic relationship between Paul D and Sethe is different from Wells ending her novel with the marriage of Sidda and Connor. Morrison focuses on the restoration between mother and daughter, with the romance as a subplot at best, whereas Wells uses the mother-daughter restoration as a means to Sidda's marriage.

predisposition to isolation, as I have been seeking to show, concepts such as girlfriends and best friends are less applicable to African American culture, not only in times of slavery and segregation but even today.[149] Sociologist Charles V. Willie and African and African diaspora studies scholar Richard J. Reddick explain that working class Black families have networks that are deeper than they are broad. Family is the strongest link, but typically such concepts as best friend are not used within this context. Willie and Reddick speak of the current situation as one that continues to echo what theorists have been saying of earlier time periods, claiming that "families tend to link up with extended family members for mutual assistance before turning to others for help" (69). This description is in keeping with Morrison's portrayal of support networks. Sethe originally relies on her family, specifically Baby Suggs, but through the course of time, Sethe, like formerly enslaved peoples, loses most of her family. Thus, Sethe and Denver's next means of support is the community, which in Morrison's text mostly doubles as a religious community.[150]

Certainly, individuals within communal groups could still form personal friendships, but the collective nature of such groups is typically focused on a greater good rather than fostering

---

[149]One of the great ironies regarding female relationships in African American culture is that although historically speaking, there is a long legacy of support systems via kin and fictive kin relations, of which academia has widely reported on, there is a contrary trope portrayed via the media in which black women rarely get along. Interestingly, most of the writing on this stereotype comes through pop culture feminist writings as opposed to academia. However, Gammage reports on this topic from a scholarly perspective and agrees, "The representation of anti-sisterhood in television dramas advance the notion that Black women are aggressive angry 'bitches'…" (107) While both reality TV and television series have come a long way since Morrison's writing of *Beloved* and probably now more than ever promote such messages, ideas that were, even in the late '80s, permeating the public consciousness regarding animosity between black women was another tension Morrison had to address when writing. She does indeed show Sethe to be at odds with the community, and specifically the women, for a long period of time. However, she works hard to push back against a misunderstanding that this is simply indicative of the culture by examining not only human nature in general but also the specific repercussions of slavery and the way it impacts relationships. Gammage insists that "portrayals of disingenuous sisterhood represents a threat to the black community" and that such "representations contradict the historically documented nature of Black women's relationships with each other" (107). Morrison's portrayal of why Sethe falls out of community and how she is admitted back in speak to a desire to promote realistic and positive sister representations.

[150] Willie and Reddick suggest that outside of family members, support often comes for working class black families through collective groups such as school and church.

relationships between individuals. Also, the fact that "[p]arents work long and hard in black working class families to provide opportunities for their children" affects how black mothers interact with one another (Willie and Reddick 69). They support each other in order to ultimately support one another's families, but they often do not have the time or energy to cultivate a relationship simply for the sake of friendship. Social work professor Robert Joseph Taylor says, "Surprisingly little research focuses on racial differences in friendship networks, or exclusively on African American friendships. Available findings on racial differences are mixed, but the preponderance of evidence indicates that Whites are more involved in friendship networks than are African Americans" (611).[151] While Taylor does not hypothesize on why whites have more friendships than African Americans, I argue that it may be because whites tend to pursue relationships for pleasure and companionship while African Americans foster relationships for reciprocal support, which Taylor identifies as fictive kin networks.

Rather than criticizing or negatively portraying matrilineage, minority literature often focuses on mother-daughter relationships and the power of the matriarchal line. Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbot acknowledge, "We hear the voices of lost mothers as we read literature by Black writers" (*Mothers and Daughters* 254). Though feminist Nan Bauer Maglin never states

---

[151] While friendship may not be sought out as a means in and of itself, the frequency of both kinship bonds and fictive kin ties for the practicality of survival does not indicate that meaningful relationships based upon friendship are completely absent from African American women's lives. Though Morrison does not explore female solidarity in terms of best friends, per se in *Beloved*, she does showcase such a friendship in *Sula* between the title's namesake and Nel and shows the loss the women suffer through the severance of the relationship as a tragedy, indicating that a female friendship can affect a woman as deeply (though differently) as a heterosexual romance. Furthermore, Alice Walker celebrates female friendship between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple* in which they offer one another physical, emotional, sexual, and financial support. While in *Sula* Morrison explores reasons important female friendships disintegrate (as societal pressures and expectations, regarding both gender and race, prompt women in different directions as they turn one another into the enemy), Walker shows how women can avoid buying into such harmful ideologies and overcome obstacles together. Thus, the African American theme of female relationships functioning as a source of sustainment against a harsh world remains. The need for a best friend with whom one relaxes and has fun may be more of an expectation in white culture.

that this literature of matrilineage emerges from particular racial and ethnic traditions, she acknowledges that "there is a growing body of literature of matrilineage; women are writing about their female heritage and their female future" (257). Maglin, like much of the current scholarship on matrilineage, uses texts by women of color as examples. In "Mothers and Daughters: Another Minority Group," author and academic Natalie M. Rosinsky specifically addresses race and its intersection with matrilineage, saying that members of racial minorities "have delineated their apprehension of the social forces which intervene between mother and daughter. Perhaps because the added oppression of minority group membership exacerbates this often painful relationship, these writers seem particularly aware of its tragic destructiveness…The 'real enemy' appears easier to see when more than one oppression unites the two women" (280-1).

Denver is able to move past mother-blame and see that her mother has been oppressed herself.[152] Her ability to see her mother's oppression results from her also having learned of her mother's strength. Beloved's time spent at Bluestone 124 is filled with a questioning of Sethe's past. It is after having learned more of Sethe's past that Denver is able to see how to help her mother in the present moment. Denver acting on Sethe's behalf ushers their relationship into a new realm, a move from a mother-young-child relationship to a mother-adult-daughter relationship in which it is no longer the sole duty of the mother to make sacrifices but rather a shared responsibility for both if the relationship is to be healthy. Because Sethe has served as an example of a strong woman to Denver, even when Sethe struggles, Denver has been given the example of what a strong woman should be and is able to emulate her mother, even though Sethe

---

[152] This is in keeping with Rosinsky's claim that literary works by ethnic women writers often display "a healing understanding on the daughter's part of her mother's victimization" as opposed to the daughter seeing her mother or the author portraying the mother as the villain (280).

237

has deviated from her characteristic self, due to her emotionally and psychologically charged interactions with Beloved. Professor of social work Barbara Turnage explains that an African American mother "teaches her daughter to 'stay the course' when times get hard, that she is worthy of love and respect, that she has the right to dream and accomplish her dreams…" (184). It is because Sethe has showcased such life lessons through her own example that Denver acts on behalf of her mother even when Sethe is temporarily unable to act for herself.

Yet, Denver not only acts for her mother but also begins to act independently of Sethe. Denver is able to mature into her own unique person without having to physically leave Sethe or distance herself emotionally from her. As non-white cultures less often embody the typical nuclear family structure, the belief, as posited by Nancy Chodorow and many other psychologists and sociologists whose theories are white-oriented, that daughters turn from their mothers to their fathers during the turbulence of adolescence, is less reflected in African American culture. Thus, although Denver's coming of age alongside a continued close relationship with Sethe may appear atypical when compared to white culture's narratives, this is not the case for black culture. Though she focuses specifically on adolescent literature, author and academic Hilary S. Crew explores the similar theme of mother-daughter relationships and specifically analyzes African American ones. She states that different perceptions of what is typical affects literary portrayals:

> The assumption that adolescence is a time of individuation and separation when the adolescent daughter separates from her mother with hostility and turns toward her father within the patriarchal nuclear family will provide a different script for a narrative plot of the mother–daughter relationship for example, than the assumption that adolescent daughters remain in relationship with their mothers. The question of what is valorized—

an adolescent daughter's coming to maturity through attaining self-sufficiency and

independence or through maintaining connections and being responsive to a mother while

retaining a unique sense of self—will affect the kind of mother-daughter relationship

constructed within a particular narrative plot. (22-3)

Morrison's text represents a daughter's attainment of a unique sense of self while maintaining a

maternal connection. Of course, since Halle never rejoins the family, it is impossible for Denver

to turn toward her father in an attempt to escape her mother. However, black culture in general

also fosters a belief that such a mother-daughter rupture is unnecessary. Thus, not only is Denver

able to mature into a woman alongside her mother, but she is also able to differentiate herself

from her mother in a healthy way, keeping her personal life from crashing when her relationship

with Sethe is rocky. This contrasts with *Divine Secrets*, where conflict with Vivi often paralyzes

Sidda as she obsesses over her mother, "Why do I dwell on my mother and the Ya-Yas?/

Because I miss them. Because I need them. Because I love them" (28). Such a question, first of

all, suggests that a daughter often thinks of her mother only if something is amiss. Denver, on the

other hand, realizes she and her mother love and need one another; if she did not, she would have

left like her brothers Howard and Buglar. But this idea is so natural to both her and the rest of her

community that it goes without saying. Denver is concerned about Sethe and makes an effort to

help restore their relationship and Sethe's health. She shows her sense of filial duty toward Sethe

in warning Paul D, "…be careful how you talk to my ma'am, hear?" (314). However, Denver

also continues with her own life. As Jesser puts it, "Denver must live with the consequences of

her mother's choice, but not be absorbed by this past" (341). Denver cannot allow herself to be

defined by her mother's act of infanticide and neither can she allow herself to be defined by

Sethe's encounter with Beloved. She certainly learns from her matrilineal past, but, thanks to her

integration into the community, specifically by people such as Lady Jones, Denver realizes that she must live her own life and encourages Sethe to do the same.

Though it is impossible to interpret Sethe and Denver's relationship as a perfect one, either before or after the community's women's intervention, Morrison certainly provides hope, which is unmistakably connected to physical proximity. Whereas Sidda distances herself spatially from Vivi, "thousands of miles, and countless misunderstandings apart from each other," Denver commits to remaining physically near (Wells 202). Of this Sethe says, "She comes in the daytime. Denver. She's still with me, my Denver" (320). Of course there are the logistics that Denver, without any resources, would not be able to travel far even if she wanted to. Contrastingly, as a successful play director, Sidda, even if she desired to be near Vivi, would not be able to continue her work and use her talent in the small town of Thornton, Louisiana. But, the proximity of Morrison's African American mother-daughter relationship as opposed to the spatial distance of Well's Caucasian mother-daughter one represents the reality of many contemporary North American families. Furthermore, the impact of proximity and frequent interaction certainly impacts a relationship. Even in a mother's relationship with a young child, spatial location plays a role, as the mother and daughter have probably internalized expectations of the typical living arrangements for their social group; thus, to an extent, a daughter may act accordingly based upon expectation.

Claiming that dominant American culture differs from global patterns in which children are encouraged to gain life experience but then return to their families, author Tarja Parssinen explains that dominant white American culture is one which "means pushing boundaries *toward* accomplishment and *away* from family" (n.p.). As adult daughters move away from their own mothers, they, in turn, experience isolation when they have their own families, often away from

family support. Scholar of recreation and leisure studies Diana C. Parry reports, "Mothers also find themselves geographically distant from female kin, which further reduces social support" (24). As the women that Parry reports upon are "mostly urban and middle/upper class," this would be mostly likely a prominently white demographic (24). Walls also recognizes the American trend to distance oneself from family, which she ties to modern individualism. She claims, "As people feel more isolated and insecure in their home life…they are not encouraged to overcome these feelings. Rather, they retreat further away…and adopt an increasingly individualistic attitude" (145). While Walls does not specifically identify this American trend as white, additional research that identifies African American families as living in physical proximity to one another highlights this fact. According to *The Marriage and Family Encyclopedia,* millennial African American families are more likely to exist within "extended family units" and even when this is not the case, "extended family members tend to live in close proximity to one another" (Gurman and Kniskern 557). While much research has been done reporting the existence of close physical proximity in African American culture, I am interested in not only the facts, but their implications for the mother-daughter relationship and all types of female kinship ties. Certainly a high level of intimacy is more likely to occur in a relationship that involves frequent interaction. Thus, Denver's remaining near Sethe speaks to a cultural norm of African American matrilineal female solidarity and showcases the restoration that is in the process of happening as likely being aided by physical proximity.

The type of mothers that participate in meaningful community, be it comprised of kin or fictive-kin, can vary based on a myriad of factors. However, as I have explored, white culture is much more likely to cultivate women and mothers who are emotionally isolated, possibly having no community at all but most likely interacting with a community only superficially. This

impacts the mother-daughter relationship because their rapport is often not sufficiently supported by other women and not prioritized, by themselves and others, as a significant female relationship. Wells' text includes countless good intentions of reconciling the mother-daughter bond, yet, the celebration of female friendship within the text undermines true female community and the matrilineal line. While some may argue that this text cannot represent more than the specific story Wells divulges, the subtle ideologies at work within the text are in keeping with many culturally constructed white philosophies, suggesting that *Divine Secrets* is a product of its historical moment and racial affiliation. *Beloved*, in contrast, serves as something of a polar opposite in Morrison's depiction of the way female community should function and its potential impact on the mother-daughter relationship, which can also be read as a product of racial affiliation and the influence of time both past and present. This is not to say that Morrison's characters are above reproach; yet, such scenarios can be read almost didactically as a warning against what happens when women do not properly support the important role of motherhood. This is also not to say that Morrison's account provides for total healing between mother and daughter. Maglin acknowledges, "While giving us a kind of strength of understanding, the discovery of our mothers' lives and the voicing of our mothers' silences do not always yield warm insights and female solidarity" (265). This becomes apparent in the repeated phrase, "It was not a story to pass on" at the end of the novel (Morrison 323-4). Yet, the story is passed on, and Morrison seems to be showing that dealing with the past and its intersection with both race and matrilineage is necessary and worth the pain. As Maglin says, "[R]ecognizing one's matrilineage in the personal and historical sense and sharing that process of discovery through the written word can have an emotionally powerful and profoundly inspiring impact" (265). Morrison does not provide a perfect ending as does Wells (which essentially falls flat due to its

simplicity and lack of realism to a careful critic), yet she does leave her readers reflective and aware of the power of female solidarity and the mother-daughter bond.

I have highlighted differences not simply for the sake of pointing out a contrast but to ultimately show how white culture needs to adapt in order to create a culture truly beneficial for women. Joseph and Lewis argue, "In the absence of supportive, collaborative kinship networks, the site for nurturance—women mothering in isolation in the nuclear family—becomes a site of danger, disempowering, and devaluing. Our struggle is to learn to create more viable networks for relationships between women in a culture which has decimated them" (144). I do not maintain that white mothers can or should blatantly imitate the othermothering modeled in ethnic cultures, as white women have a very different history, and though there is certainly common ground, their struggles are in many ways different. I do, however, believe that they must be open to glean from women of color how to adapt a spirit of meaningful assistance. White women must realize what has distanced them from one another and come together to fight against these conditions and effectively support one another, specifically as mothers. Joseph and Lewis exhort, "The feminist struggle is to create, out of aloneness, new forms of family and chosen kinship connections which can, along with the endless series of concrete political fights and demands, generate solidarity, a shared determination to fight oppressive conditions" (145). I would add to this the hope that not only will white culture adopt effective othermothering principles but that white women will interact with women of color in creating new sorts of othermothering dynamics of fictive kinships.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

White authored fiction offers tangible examples of how the epistemology of whiteness regarding motherhood has influenced contemporary women, both those who write the stories and those who receive them. From Barbara Kingsolver's dualistic perception of a mother as either good or bad, to Janet Fitch's establishing negative associations with a working mother, to Rebecca Wells' glorification of female friendships unconcerned with the need to support the familial obligation of an emotionally isolated mother, negative motifs inherent, but mostly unacknowledged, in white culture make their way into the literature. One of the consequences of negative portrayals of mothers and daughters' subsequent internalization of these messages is the distance that is forged between mother and daughter, resulting in a lack of communication, mother-blame, and mother-guilt. In turn, the prevalence of such dysfunctional relationships causes most to believe that a fraught relationship is normative for mothers and daughters.

Despite the frequency of angst ridden mother-daughter relationships in white Western culture, most daughters do not turn their backs on motherhood, but instead most attempt to be as dissimilar from their mother as possible. Paula Caplan states, "Two of the primary fears of adult daughters in relation to their mothers are the fear of displeasing her (or even losing her love) and the fear of becoming like her" (*The New Don't Blame Mother* 214). In American culture, it is seldom complimentary for a woman to find herself "turning into her mother." Adrienne Rich, who later admits to having written specifically about white culture though she did not hedge her claims as such, writes of daughters' matraphobia due to seeing the mother as "the unfree woman" whom the daughters dread becoming (236). In seeing how this belief manifests itself in literature, throughout most of *White Oleander*, Astrid grapples with her interconnectedness with

and separation from her mother. At first she is unsure, "I didn't know if I was like her or not," then she resists, "I'm not you, Mother. I'm not," but finally she accepts her mother's influence on her, "I was more like my mother than I'd ever believed" (235, 256, 298). However, the realization occurs alongside Astrid's hardening as a character, in which she learns how to survive by cutting herself off from the world and allowing herself to feel as little as possible. Astrid's becoming like her mother, similarly to Astrid's becoming a hardened, street smart young woman, are not positive aspects of her identity, but rather survival techniques.

Continuing this trend, Sidda, in an effort to maintain her own identity from both her mother and her mothers' friends, says, "I've managed not to become a full-fledged Junior Ya-Ya" (*Little Altars* 210). She resists becoming a Junior Ya-Ya because it would mean that she has followed in her mother's footsteps rather than forging her own way. Lisa Firestone, director of research and education, states a common viewpoint on daughters becoming like their mothers in white culture, though she never acknowledges race as impacting this outlook, "Adopting our mother's ways of doing things would be beneficial for our development if we were raised by the 'ideal' or even a 'good enough' mother. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many—or most—women" (n.p.). Firestone's belief that most mothers are not only not ideal but not even good enough certainly mirrors white culture's aversion to mothers and offers insight into why most daughters do not seek to become like their flawed mothers. Although I am arguing that daughters' aversion to being like their mothers is negative, this does not mean that everything mothers model is positive. Marianne Hirsch points out that although the mother has beneficial traits, she has also learned life lessons from which daughters can glean behaviors and choices to avoid if they are willing to fully see and know their mothers: "[T]he silence of mothers about their own fate and the details of their lives, insures that those lives, those stories will be repeated

by daughters…Ironically, if daughters knew the mothers' stories, they might *not* repeat them"

(67). As long as daughters fear becoming like their mothers, they will continue to make the same

mistakes because they have not fostered enough of a relationship to know about and learn from

their mothers' lives.

Mother blame also isolates the focus on the seldom 'good enough' mother, exempting the

father from obligation. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, while Nathan is the obvious culprit in the Price

family's undoing, neither Kingsolver nor the daughters spend much time on him. Kingsolver

actually gives Nathan a very sympathetic backstory which seems to be presented as punishment

enough. Such a depiction places the blame on the event and presents Nathan as impressionable

and sensitive. Kingsolver presents him almost like a victim and compares his hardening to a

child's psychological dysfunction, "If his guilt made him a tyrant before men, it made him like a

child before his God…the type of tough boy who's known too little love and is quick to blame

others for his mistakes" (198). Once Adah finally learns the truth about her father's past, she,

like Orleanna, assumes Nathan has no control over his actions: "Fate sentenced Our Father to

pay for those lives…" (413). Even the conclusion of the novel suggests a compassion and

communal responsibility for men's shortcomings. Ruth May, who in spirit form narrates the last

chapter, says to Orleanna, "The sins of the fathers belong to you…" (543). Rather than men

being held accountable for their actions, rather than fathers being held accountable for their

mistakes, paternal shortcomings are shown to actually reflect back on mothers, who alone are

judged. Critic Denyse Landry explains, "[M]others are held to a higher standard than fathers

because of women's traditional association with, and relegation to, the so-called private sphere

and the assumption that women are innately nurturing" (158). The Price women, Orleanna

included, all hold Nathan to a lower standard than they hold Orleanna, and Kingsolver's lack of censure for this perspective suggests an endorsement or at least acceptance of this practice.

The same gendered double standard is at work in *Divine Secrets*. Despite the fact that Sidda's father Shep is an alcoholic (like Vivi) and is absent in his children's lives, Sidda fixates on the wrongs of her mother. Caro points out this oversight, "But while you're slinging arrows, let me remind you that you did—do—have a father, Sidda. Understandable that you should overlook him, vanishing act that he is" (171). However, while Wells includes this acknowledgement, her narrative continues to emphasize only the tension between mother and daughter. Sidda even refutes the idea that her father should be noticed, "Yeah, but Mama was always the star. Daddy was a bit player" (171). With the rebuttal, the narrative returns to the emphasis on mothers. Even while Wells seems to try to temper Sidda's memories of her mother with grace for her shortcomings, there is no focus on the father. Caro takes a similar route to Firestone's argument that there are few 'good enough' mothers when she comments to Sidda, "And however she fucked you up—and I'm sure she did—every mother fucks every kid up" (171). Through the mouthpiece of Caro, rather than refuting the claim of a fallen mother, Wells instead merely lessens the blow by dispensing an equal sentence to all mothers while overlooking fathers. This approach reifies the findings Pew Research Center reports upon in their article "Motherhood Today: Tougher Challenges, Less Success" which divulges, "Mothers are seen as having the more difficult job, but they are also judged more harshly than are fathers" (n.p.). White culture's high expectations of motherhood influence the exacting views society has of mothers and that women specifically have of themselves and other women.

In order for a daughter to fully see her mother and learn of her mother's strengths, the mother must be allowed to tell her own story. Until recently, literature that focuses on mothers

247

and daughters has typically been "daughter-centric," which results in the mother only being portrayed as her daughter sees her (O'Reilly 146 "I Come From"). Marianne Hirsch writes of the importance of the mother's subjectivity and of the mother telling her own story in *The Mother/Daughter Plot,* insisting, "Feminism might begin by listening to the stories that mothers have to tell, and by creating the space in which mothers might articulate those stories" (167). Hirsch advocates fictional accounts being constructed in ways that value the mother's voice and story. She references *Beloved* as an example of a fictional account in which the mother's viewpoint is made known. Even though Sethe is not the narrator, she tells her story to both her daughters and Paul D. Hirsch maintains that as culture progresses, mothers are being presented, similarly to Sethe, as characters in their own right.

However, as I mention in the introduction, part of the problem with Hirsch's analysis is that her study interprets the progress of women of color as progress for women authors in general. Yet, the three contemporary white authored texts I have analyzed suggest that this not true for white women. In looking at ways in which mothers are allowed to speak or silenced in fiction, Kingsolver, Fitch, and Wells all predominantly write about the mother from the daughter's perspective. This results in a marginalization and villainization of the mothers. Hirsch does note that black writers portray motherhood differently than white authors, "Even when they write in the voices of daughters rather than mothers, the black feminist writers in this tradition tend to find it necessary, much more than white feminist writers, to 'think back through their mothers' in order to define themselves identifiably in their own voices as subjects" (Hirsch 177). However, this trend which Hirsch identifies only with black feminist writers actually appears to be true regarding many cultures of color which distinguish themselves from white culture. Even

the issue of feminism is perhaps less important than Hirsch perceives, as minority cultures tend to hold more reverence for motherhood in general, regardless of a gendered social justice focus.

Similar to what Hirsch notices in *Beloved,* the mother's story is captured in *The Kitchen God's Wife* as Winnie narrates her past to her daughter Pearl. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, although the daughters' perspectives are apparent in many portions of the story, the narrative also focuses on Laura's point of view and experiences that she has apart from her daughters' observations in order to provide a more complete picture of her identity. Thus, in the white authored works I have analyzed in this project, mother-daughter conflict is exacerbated by a daughter-centric viewpoint which emphasizes only the mother rather than the father as the culpable parent and which limits a knowledge of the mother's experience; texts by women of color, however, include a narrative that is not only largely *about* the mother is also *from* her perspective.

While these limited portrayals of white motherhood in literature negatively impact the mother daughter relationship in each story, some may argue that the portrayals are, in actuality, only fictional, and therefore should not be taken too seriously. At the end of the day, they are only stories. I have sought to argue throughout this project that fiction is not simply a manipulated plot line but rather is always influenced by reality and reflects ideological debates and beliefs. However, I will briefly take a different approach to the question of how seriously we should consider these fictional stories. Moving to the realm of autobiography, let us briefly consider whether we see a substantially different understanding of motherhood in texts authored by white women and women of color.

Motherhood Memoirs

Maternal autobiographies, sometimes call "momoirs" or "mommy lit" have become a prolific subgenre. This is a recent phenomenon, for although Adrienne Rich and Tille Olsen pointed out the lack of mother stories in the 1970s, in 1989 Hirsch suggested not enough had changed and asked, "Do mothers write of their own experience as mothers?... To what extent do women writers who are mothers conspire their own silence?" (176). Even more recently, feminist Joanne S. Prey in 1997 and then again in 2007 asked, "Why do we so rarely hear the voices of mothers in narrative form?"(187). Thus, at the turn of the millennium, the outpouring of mother voices has answered the promptings to fill a longstanding void; not only have mothers been hungry to tell their stories, but they have also been hungry to hear each other's. Author and poet Naomi Lowinsky points out that mothers have always had such stories but that only recently has a receptive audience emerged, "Women lament the lack of narratives of women's lives; yet women's stories are all around us. We don't hear them because ou[r] perception is shaped by a culture that trivializes 'women's talk'…" (228). Of late, it is obvious that women do not see their talk or stories as trivial, and mothers are going to great lengths to make their stories known. Stephani Wilkinson and Jennifer Niesslein, in their article "Motherhood in Book Publishing," argue that feminism is certainly a positive force in bringing about the change, noting that women have decided that if men can write on topics such as sports,[153] which is important to them, then women can write on a topic as important to them as motherhood. While the argument could certainly be made that feminism has been antagonistic toward motherhood, specifically during the Second Wave, motherhood memoirs can be

---

[153] Of course, sports are also important to many women.

interpreted as an example of how feminists' adherence to female agency has propelled women to tell their stories precisely as mothers.

Motherhood memoirs focus, as the title suggests, on a particular aspect of a woman's life and identity. Although women writing their own experience of mothering has been a needed shift and shows progress from the times in which mothers were only written about, mostly by their daughters, some would ask whether women narrowing their role primarily to that of mother in their memoirs is positive. In many ways, such writings continue the trend of "intensive mothering," which is Sharon Hays' widely adopted term for a woman's identity largely centering on her role as an ever nurturing and unselfish mother and which is similar to what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call the new momism. Drawing from these two concepts of intensive mothering and the new momism, O'Reilly brings culturally constructed ideas about motherhood into play regarding motherhood memoirs and posits that "as this new ideology made possible a public voice on motherhood, it simultaneously limited what that voice could say about motherhood" ("The Motherhood Memoir" 205). Thus, although motherhood memoirs are (and should be) celebrated for women speaking out, one must keep in mind that mothers are aware of social expectations of good mothering, specifically "the assumption that children are the all-consuming focus and purpose of a mother's life" and many strive, whether consciously or unconsciously, to abide by such standards (O'Reilly "The Motherhood Memoir" 205). Titles of motherhood memoirs such as *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace; Martinis and Motherhood: Tales of Wonder, Woe, and WTF?!;* and *Confessions of a Naughty Mommy: How I Found My Lost Libido* show an intentionality for some authors to move beyond the model of a perfect mother. However, O'Reilly argues that it is not enough for maternal memoirs to simply point out problems with the

culture and its perception of mothers and family structures. Until motherhood memoirs seek to change perceptions and portrayals of motherhood, they are not truly revolutionary. O'Reilly passionately argues, "[W]hy are we content with only unmasking motherhood: should our aim not be to challenge and change patriarchal motherhood?" ("The Motherhood Memoir" 209). In answering O'Reilly's question, one may need to consider whether the mothers writing the texts are responsible for promoting social change because they seek to share their story.

As motherhood memoirs fit within white culture's concepts of intensive mothering and the new momism, it is unsurprising that motherhood memoirs are written and mostly read by white women. In my analysis of this genre, there are some accounts in which the women deliberately try to write against maternal norms, but there is usually little, if any, awareness that the norms they are writing against are specifically those fostered by white culture. There is also little research available on the number of motherhood memoirs written by specific racial groups. However, out of the fifty-six titles ranked by GoodReads' "Popular Motherhood Memoir Books," I was only able to identify one as being written by a woman of color, Louise Erdrich's *The Bluejay Dance: A Birth Year* (1995.)

As opposed to the white authored texts which focus almost exclusively on motherhood, Erdrich explores the balancing of motherhood with her work as a writer. She also meditates upon nature, domesticity, and family heritage in general, highlighting the Native American belief, which is similar to that of other cultures', that a woman's identity does not need to be subsumed by motherhood. However, some of the comments on the GoodReads website from white readers exemplify white culture's difficulty in broadly perceiving motherhood.[154] One reader comments, "I never felt grounded. Was I reading about motherhood, writing, nature? I didn't know what

---

[154] The readers' comments are next to their profile picture, and all appear to be white.

kind of book I was reading." Another one states, "I expected it to be more about 'birth' and motherhood as it is subtitled 'A Birth Year'…Instead there were a lot of passages about elk and hedgehog and skunk and feral cats and many, many plants." The most telling critique takes Erdrich to task for not being enough of an adoring mother:

> Her new baby is not mentioned in every chapter, and less increasingly as the chapters progress. Sometimes, it's uncomfortably absent. It doesn't have a name, it's just "the baby", and her other children and husband are mere sketches, mentioned only 3 or 4 times or so. As such, the book doesn't read like a journal of a mother doting on her daughter and her every milestone and recounting family life…I feel that something is missing, that she is hiding something from me.

Erdrich is a good example of what is quite possibly an exception to the rule in the sense that she is a woman of color writing a motherhood memoir, yet her failure to adhere to the rules of white culture motherhood, to be continuously present physically, mentally, and emotionally, and to have her life oscillate fully around her children, have evoked criticism from white readers. Her integration of interests and lack of total focus on her child alone separates her work from most memoirs within the genre. O'Reilly claims, "Most motherhood memoirs, because of their identification with the new momism, cannot discern, let alone critique, the root causes of mother's oppression: thus, the genre remains one of complaint and not change" (212). Erdrich does not claim to be purposely challenging the rules, and I do not believe her work to be a conscious statement against mainstream motherhood. However, her natural way of interacting with motherhood alongside other elements of her personhood flaunts traditional ideologies of motherhood nonetheless, as is evident by some of her critics' discomfort. I see Erdrich's work as

a foundational text for change not because she talks about how change needs to take place but rather because she simply chronicles how she has been a multifaceted woman in her own family.

In asking why it is that women of color do not seem to be writing motherhood memoirs, the answer may be closely connected to my focus of this entire project: women of color do not feel the need to enact a perfect mother image; women of color who are mothers do not see themselves solely through their maternity, and women of color do not see their enterprise as mothers as something so unique and individualized that they need to write a book about their exceptional experiences. Deeshaw Philyaw, journalist for *Bitch Media*, a "nonprofit, independent, feminist media organization," wrote an article entitled "'Ain't I a Mommy?': Why Are So Few Motherhood Memoirs Penned by Women of Color?" In it, Philyaw includes the interview of Jennifer, who is African American. When asked why there are so few non-white motherhood memoirs, Jennifer responds, "Historically, we've had to take care of our kids and their kids… Now we only have to take care of our kids, and we just don't have the same level of angst as white women do. Definitely not enough to write a whole book about it" (n.p.). Philyaw agrees that black women specifically and women of color in general simply feel less ambivalence about motherhood. However, she also argues that even the motherhood memoirs that are written by minority women do not receive the same level as attention as the white ones, and many may never be accepted for publication. Due to such experiences of being overlooked, "women of color don't see their mothering experiences and concerns reflected in the mommy media machine, and we get the cultural message loud and clear: Affluent white women are the only mothers who really matter" (Philyaw n.p.). While I agree that it is quite possible that motherhood memoirs by women of color are being overlooked, I argue that the name

"motherhood memoir" is perhaps too narrow a term for the sort of autobiography minority women write.

In a cursory historical overview, one actually finds that motherhood is something that women of color have long been including in the accounts of their lives, but the works have not been pigeon holed as motherhood memoir; rather, motherhood is simply one integrated aspect of their identity. Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a perfect example. Her role as a mother is intricately tied to the plot line, yet Jacobs views her experience as so much more than just that of a mother's. Consequently, Jacob's text is not typically categorized as motherhood memoir. Another example is Maya Angelou's seven-volume autobiography series. Angelou includes much information about her journey as a mother but does not limit her experiences to only those related to motherhood.

Overall, when one writes autobiographically, there is, on some level, a belief that one's story is unique or distinct enough for others to be interested in reading it without feeling like it is a story they already completely know. Yet, there are important distinctions to be made. The basic premise behind a woman, specifically a woman of color, writing her story is quite different than for a white male. Susan Stanford Friedman, author of "Women's Autobiographical Selves Theory and Practice," points out that

> the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples…the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities… individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (35)

Friedman's comments can be helpful in looking at the motivation for why mothers tell their own stories: they see themselves as a part of a large group of women who are or hope to someday be parents with whom they want to share their experiences. As white culture is more individualistic than other cultures, the greater amount of mother-daughter and mother memoirs may stem from the double bind of autobiography: on the one hand is the idea of sharing a story similar enough to others that they will find it interesting because they can connect, but on the other hand is the balance of the story needing to be unique enough for readers to feel it merits reading. As Friedman states, "The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism" (39). As Friedman points out, true individuality is impossible, but white culture is deeply invested in believing the myth.

When minority women write about motherhood, they tend to focus on motherhood's intersection with other roles in their lives, and they present their experience as one that has collective significance. *I'm Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood, and Work* (2005), by Lonnae O'Neal Parker, is a good contemporary example of the difference in white motherhood memoirs and those by women of color. Parker, an African American woman, identifies her work as "memoir and history" (xviii.) Amidst writing about her life as a mother, wife, and career woman, she, like Erdrich, does not limit her identity to that of mother alone. Furthermore, in contrast to many white motherhood memoirs which attempt personal subjectivity, she also does not attempt to distinguish herself from other mothers. In contrast, she aligns herself with historical black women, claiming, "It is many of these voices that steady me on my feet when the hour is late, the woman's work is endless, and sleep is a dream" (xviii.) As

opposed to sharing her story as evidence of how difficult mothering is and how unique her experience is, she celebrates the collectivity of her story, "When I tell myself I'm tired after everything I have to do as a wife, mother, and reporter, Ida B. Wells tells me, *yes, well, you're not the first woman to be tired* and her example gives me heart" (xix). Intricately tied up within Parker's story of her own mothering is its connection with other mothers, and this tends to be true of minority women's work.

In looking at the genres of both fiction and nonfiction, the motif of clinging to an impossibly high ideal of motherhood is apparent in white authored texts. Yet, the inability of anyone to measure up to such perfection does not prompt most authors to challenge the ideal but rather to scapegoat mothers by presenting deviations from the myth as failures as well as presenting mothers' shortcomings as solely their fault, rather than an indication of unrealistic cultural expectations. However, both the novels and memoirs of women of color indicate acceptance of variety within motherhood and grace for maternal failings which speaks to minority cultures' comfort with functioning outside of hegemonic white culture. Yet, as society continues to advance as more awareness of the challenges inherent within motherhood become publicized, there are still questions to be raised and topics to be discussed.

An area for continued research lies within the ways that average, nonacademic mothers have begun presenting their own stories of motherhood, as social media is now allowing for even mothers who do not necessarily consider themselves to be writers to tell their own stories. Most of the works that I have analyzed in this project have been written by women who already have identities as writers, be it a novelist or journalist; if they do not have an identity as a writer, they are often some kind of public figure, giving them easy access to helpful editors and even ghostwriters. Yet, in this day and age, ordinary people who may or may not see themselves as

writers have the ability to record the narratives of their lives and make them easily accessible for the public through technology and social media. Analysis of the intersection of women with technology has given rise to new studies such as what sociologist Judy Wajcman has termed technofeminism; more specifically, Sadie Plant coined the term cyberfeminism in 1994 "to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general" (qtd. in Consalvo 109).

Two specific technological outlets that have great promise for studying how white mothers and mothers of color portray themselves as mothers and, consequently, their ideologies of motherhood in general, are Facebook and blogs. Edison Research's "Moms and Media 2015" report accounts that 78% of mothers have a Facebook account and journalist Sam Laird reports that there are 3,900,000 mommy bloggers in North America and 500 "that have considerable power and reach" (n.p.). Thus, the undeniable volume of mothers writing of their experiences online through one or both of these two venues warrants investigation. Examining "cybermothering"[155] within the "momosphere,"[156] as they are sometimes referenced, would provide useful information regarding why ordinary mothers record their experiences and whether they continue the trend that white authored fiction and nonfiction have thus far promulgated of unrealistic mother fantasies and mother deprecation if and when the ideals go unmet. Also, information regarding the kinds of communities that mothers create online would help provide information about ways in which culture either continues to limit itself through an adherence to

---

[155] See Caroline Gatrell's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Motherhood.*
[156] It is unclear who first coined the term; however, in her article "Blogging the Maternal," Lesley Husbands suggests that the term emerged as a way to discuss the phenomenon of mother bloggers. Other works using this term concur, using "momosphere" not to reference any type of activity involving mothers online but instead specifically the act of mothers blogging.

the new momism or ways in which these barriers are beginning to be broken down as more women than ever write about their experiences of mothering.

The aim of my project has been to highlight how many well-known and highly esteemed theories and beliefs about motherhood are not actually universal (though they have been applied as if they are) but are specific to white culture due to its adherence to harmful beliefs about femininity and womanhood that have then been transferred into beliefs about mothers and motherhood. This knowledge can lead to more positive race relations once white culture realizes that people of color have avoided harmful ideologies of motherhood that ultimately turn mothers and daughters away from each other. The aim of my conclusion is to emphasize the importance of addressing this topic in our historical moment of 2017. Women have experienced immense progress in the past century. The same is equally true of mothers, two of whom have recently ran for vice president and president of the United States.[157] Women have not only gained entrance into public arenas but have become leading figures of reform and social change. However, despite the progress, the antiquity of women's perceptions about their own mothers, and themselves as mothers, remains. Women can only claim oppression from patriarchy from the outside world for so long. In regards to the chains that bind women to harmful ideologies of motherhood, they are, indeed, mostly self-inflicted in a day and age in which women are encouraged to think and act for themselves. White mothers must simply let go of the preposterous myths on their own, regardless of what society does.

Nothing ever changes when it is society's job to change. "Society" is a term that lets individuals off the hook, so to speak. It is up to individuals to not only unmask motherhood, as Maushart puts it, but to unmask white culture. Most people of color already realize what is

---

[157] Sarah Palin ran as the Republican Party nominee for vice president with presidential candidate John McCain in the 2008 election, and Hilary Clinton ran as the Democratic Party nominee for president in the 2016 election.

amiss; thus, the solution, or at least a good starting place, is for white people to look within themselves and around them to question what they believe and why they believe it. Ultimately, it is up to white people to be willing to look at the culture of others unlike themselves and be teachable. My goal is not to create a spirit of competition in which cultures are ranked against one another; certainly each culture has its own customs, rituals, and ideologies, some of which are positive and some of which are negative. I have pointed out examples of ways that white authors have fallen into reductive portrayals of mothers because they have been influenced by dominant culture. But, my purpose is not to suggest that motherhood and all things related in white culture are doomed. Having researched and written on this topic, I now have an understanding which I am hopeful will make me a better daughter; furthermore, I am confident that my knowledge will help me to be a better mother to my daughters than I would otherwise have been. Aurora Levins Morales quotes what a wise woman told her, and I repeat it now, "It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughters will have it easier, but her daughter will be raised differently. In the third generation the daughters are free" (51-2). And here is the ultimate key for change: white mothers individually resisting and raising their daughters to do the same. This is not to say that all elements of mother-guilt, mother-blame, mother-idolization, mother-isolation, and the list goes on, will instantly disappear. But, it is to say that the ambivalence and angst, contrary to so much psychological theory, is not simply inevitable. White mothers and daughters can find their way back to one another, and white mothers can find their way, perhaps for the first time, back to themselves.

Works Cited

Abbey, Sharon, and Charlotte Harris. "Motherline Connections across Cultures and

Generations." *Mother and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation,*

edited by Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,

2000, pp. 247-66.

Abbey, Sharon, and Andrea O'Reilly. *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and*

Patterns. Second Story Press, 1998.

Adams, Sarah LaChance. *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do:*

The Ethics of Ambivalence. Columbia University Press, 2014.

"African-American Families in the New Millennium" *The Marriage and Family Encyclopedia,*

2017. .jrank.org/pages/60/African-American-Families-African-American-Families-in-

New-Millennium.html">African-American Families - African-american Families In The

New Millennium</a.

Alcoff, Linda Martin. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self.* Oxford University Press,

2006.

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina.* Penguin Books, 1993.

Alta. *Momma: A Start on all the Untold Stories.* Times Change Press, 1974.

Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.* Bloomsbury, 2004.

"The American Middle Class is Losing Ground: No Longer the Majority and Falling Behind

Financially." *Pew Research Center.* pp. 1-9. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-

american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/#fn-21084-3.

Angelou, Maya. *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*. Modern Library, 2004.

Apter, Terri. *Altered Loves: Mothers and Daughters During Adolescence*. Ballantine Books, 1991.

Armstrong, Trena Easley 1958-. *The Hidden Help: Black Domestic Workers in the Civil Rights Movement.* 2012. University of Louisville, Master's Thesis. dx.doi.org/10.18297/etd/46.

Associated Press. "Baptist Seminary Launching Homemaking Program." *Dallas Morning News*, 10 Aug. 2007.

Aubry, Timothy. *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans.* University of Iowa Press, 2006.

Baker, Christina. "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Mothers and Daughters." *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation,* edited by Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000, pp. 203-12.

---and Christina Baker Kline. *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism.* Bantam, 1996.

Banash, David. *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption*, Duke University Press, 2013.

Barak, Julie. "'Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre': A Second Coming into Language in Julia Alvarez's How the García Girls Lost Their Accents." *MELUS,* vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 159-76. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/467770.

Barzilai, Shuli. *Lacan and the Matter of Origins.* Stanford University Press, 1999.

Batkin, Lisa. "'Bad Moms' is What Happens When Men Attempt to Make a Feminist Movie." *Broadly.* 18 Aug. 2016. broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/bad-moms-is-what-happens-when-men-attempt-to-make-a-feminist-movie.

Baym, Nina. "Gloria Anzaldúa." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volume E:*
Literature Since 1945, edited by Nina Baym, Jerome Klinkowitz, and Patricia B.
Wallace, Norton and Company, 2007, p. 2935.

Beard, Elizabeth M. "'Strong Muscles and a Merciful Heart': Earthly and Divine Motherhood in
the Novels of Rebecca Wells." *The Virgin's Daughters: Catholic Traditions and the*
Post-Colonial South in Contemporary Women's Writing. 53-80. 2009. Louisiana State
University, Doctoral Dissertation, etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-04172009-
084505/unrestricted/ beard_diss.pdf.

Bell, Linda and Jane Ribbens. "Isolated Housewives and Complex Maternal Worlds – The
Significance of Social Contacts between Women with Young Children in Industrial
Societies." *The Sociological Review,* vol. 42, pp. 227–62. doi:10.1111/j.1467-
954X.1994.tb00089.x.

Benedict, Helen. "Looking for Love." *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 16, no. 10-11, 1999,
pp. 40-1.

Bess, Jennifer. "Imploding the Miranda Complex in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost*
Their Accents." *College Literature.* vol. 34, no. 1, 2007, pp. 78-105. *JSTOR,*
www.jstor.org/stable /25115406.

Bessey, Sarah. *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women.* Howard
Books, 2013.

Billingsley, Gale. "Women in Traditional China and their Portrayal in Chinese Folktales." *Yale-*
New Haven Teachers Institute. 2016. www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum /units/1984/4/84.
04.03.x.html.

Bird, S. Elizabeth. *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture.* Westview Press, 1996.

Blair-Loy, Mary. *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives.* Harvard College, 2003.

Bloodworth, Dennis. *The Chinese Looking Glass*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1966.

Bloom, Lynn Z. "Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies." *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature,* edited by Cathy Davison and E. M. Broner, Ungar Pub Co, 1980, pp. 291-303.

Bobel, Chris, "When Good Enough Isn't: Mother Blame in the Continuum Concept." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, pp. 68-78. jarm.journals. yorku.ca/index. php/jarm/article/view/4923/4117.

du Bois, Cora. "The Dominant Value Profile of American culture." *American Anthropologist,* vol. 57, no. 6, 1955, pp. 1232-1239, doi: 10.1525/aa.1955.57.6.02a00130.

Born, Brad. "Kingsolver's Gospel for Africa: (White Western Female) Heart of Goodness." *Mennonite Life,* vol. 56, no. 1, 2001, n. pag. ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-56-no-1/article/kingsolvers-gospel-for-africa-western-white-female/.

de Bouvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

--- *America Day by Day*. University of California Press, 1999.

Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. "Female Laborers in the Harvest: Female Preaching the Early Nineteenth Century." The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 117- 61.

Briscoe, Constance. *Ugly*. Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2009.

Brown, Ivana. "Ambivalence of the Motherhood Experience." *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 121-39.

Burack, Cynthia. *Healing Identities: Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Groups*. Cornell University, 2004.

Burrows, Victoria. *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison*. Palgrave McMillan, 2004.

Caesar, Judith. "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in The Kitchen God's Wife." *Amy Tan*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, pp. 37-48.

Callahan, Laura. "'Three Cheers for Eve': Feminism, Capitalism, and Artistic Subjectivity in Janet Fitch's White Oleander." *Women's Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2008, pp. 495-518. *Social Science Premium Collection,* doi: 10.1080/00497870802165460.

Caplan, Paula. "Don't Blame Mother: Then and Now." *Mother and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation,* edited by Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000. pp. 237-45.

--- *The New Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship*. Routledge, 2000.

Carini, Lindsay M., Christopher A. Murgatroyd, and Benjamin C. Nephew. "Using Chronic Social Stress to Model Postpartum Depression in Lactating Rodents." *Journal of Visualized Experiments,* vol. 76, 2013 p. 50324, doi:10.3791/50324 (2013).

Casal, Susan Sánchez. "In a Neighborhood of Another Color: Latina/Latino Struggles for Home." *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity,* edited by Rosemary Marangoly George, Westview Press, 1998, pp. 326-54.

Chambers, Veronica. *Having It All? Black Women and Success*. Broadway Books, 2007.

Chan, Sucheng. "Asian American Struggles for Civil, Political, Economic, and Social Rights." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader,* edited by Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Thomas Chen. Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 213-38.

Chang, Grace. "Undocumented Latinas: The New 'Employable Mothers.'" *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency,* edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, Routledge, 1993, pp. 259-86.

Chaplain, Jocelyn. *Feminist Counseling in Action.* Sage Publications, 1999.

Chodorow, Nancy. "Family Structure and Feminine Personality." *Woman, Culture, and Society,* edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Louise Lamphere, and Joan Bamberger, Stanford University Press, 1974. pp. 43-66.

---*The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* University of California Press, 1999.

Chow, Esther Ngan-Ling. "The Development of Feminist Consciousness among Asian American Women." *Gender and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1987, pp. 284–299. www.jstor.org/stable/189565.

Cohn, D'Vera, Gretchen Livingston and Wendy Wang, 2014, "After Decades of Decline, A Rise in Stay-at-Home Mothers." *Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, 2014. pp. 1-7. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/04/08/after-decades-of-decline-a-rise-in-stay-at-home-mothers/.

Coll, Cynthia García, Janet L. Surrey, Phyllis Buccio-Notaro, and Barbara Molla. "Incarcerated Mothers: Crimes and Punishments." *Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers,* edited by Cynthia García Coll, Janet L. Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten, The Guilford Press, 1998, pp. 255-74.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-

      Daughter Relationships." *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and*

      Daughters, edited by Patricia Bell-Scott, et al, Beacon Press, 1991, pp. 42-60.

--- "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood."

      Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency, edited by Evelyn Nakano

      Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, Routledge, 1993, pp. 45-66.

Consalvo, Mia. "Cyberfeminism." *Encyclopedia of New Media.* SAGE, 2002, pp. 109-10.

Cooper, Camille Wilson. "Racially Conscious Mothering in the Colorblind Century: Implications

      for African American Motherwork." *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience,*

      Identity, Policy, Agency, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Columbia University Press, 2010,

      pp. 338-51.

Correa, Teresa. Framing Latinas: Hispanic Women through the Lenses of Spanish-Language and

      English-Language News Media." *Journalism,* 2010, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 425-33. *Sage*

      Journals, doi: 10.1177/1464884910367597.

Cottle, Michelle. "Leaning Out: How Michelle Obama became a Feminist Nightmare."

      POLITICO Magazine, 21 November 2013, pp. 1-2, politico.com/magazine/

      story/2013/11/leaning-out-michelle-obama-100244?o=1.

Crew, Hilary S. "Feminist Theories and the Voices of Mothers and Daughters in Selected

      African- American Literature for Young Adults." *African American Voices in Young*

      Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation, edited by Karen Patricia Smith,

      Scarecrow Press, 1994, pp. 79-114.

The Council of Economic Advisors. "Nine Facts About American Families and Work." 2014,

      pp. 1-19, www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nine_facts_about_family_and_

      work_real_final.pdf

Dann, Joanne. "Wanted: A Dr. Spock for Black Mothers." *New York Times,* 18 Apr. 1971, p. 78.

Das Dasgupta, Shamita and Sayantani DasGupta. "Bringing Up Baby: Raising a 'Third World'

      Daughter in the 'First World.'" *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire,*

      edited by Sonia Shah, 1997, pp. 182-99.

Davidson, Cathy N and E. M. Broner. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature.*

      Ungar Pub. Co., 1980.

Delgado, Asunción Horno. *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings.*

      University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror.*

      Temple University Press, 1997.

Deruy, Emily. "Americans Aren't That Comfortable With Stay-At-Home Dads." *ABC,* n. pag. 30

      May 2013, abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/News/study-finds-americans-comfortable-

      stay-home-dads/story?id=19288320.

DeMarr, May Jean. "*The Poisonwood Bible.*" *Barbara Kingsolver.* Greenwood Press, 1999, pp.

      117-44.

Deutscher, Penelope. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion,*

      Resistance. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Dill, Bonnie Thornton. "Our Mothers' Grief: Racial Ethnic Women and the Maintenance of

      Families." *Journal of Family History,* vol. 13, no. 4, 1988, pp. 415-31. *Sage Journals,*

      doi: 10.1177/036319908801300125.

Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

Dixon, Penelope. *Mothers and Mothering: An Annotated Feminist Bibliography.* Garland, 1991.

Dinnerstein, Dorothy. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. Other Press, 1999.

Donovan, Frank. *The Women in Their Lives: The Distaff Side of the Founding Founders*. New Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966.

Douglas, Susan Jeanne and Meredith W. Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and how it has Undermined Women.* Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2005.

Dow, Dawn. "Black Moms and 'White Motherhood Society': African American Middle-Class Mothers' Perspectives on Work, Family, and Identity." ISSI Fellows Working Papers. pp. 1-41, 7 Oct. 7, 2011, escholarship.org/uc/item/6kr3v4pz.

--- *"*Integrated Motherhood: Beyond Hegemonic Ideologies of Motherhood." *Journal of Marriage and Family,* vol. 78, no. 1, 2016, pp. 180–96. *Wiley Online Library*, doi:/10.1111/jomf.12264/full

--- "Mothering Ideologies of African-American and White Women: Integrated versus Traditional Motherhood." *Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, CA*, 7 Aug. 2009.

Druckerman, Pamela. *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting (now with Bébé Day by Day: 100 Keys to French Parenting)*. Penguin Books, 2014.

duCille, Ann. "Domesticity and the Demon Mother." *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity,* edited by Rosemary Marangoly George. Westview Press, 1998, pp. 279-300.

---*Skin Trade*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Ebaugh, Helen Rose and Mary Curry. "Fictive Kin as Social Capital in New Immigrant Communities." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2000. pp. 189-209. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/1389793.

Entzminger, Betina. "Revising Alcott, Revising America: Reconfigurations of Little Women." *Contemporary Reconfigurations of American Literary Classics: The Origin and Evolution of American Stories*. Routledge, 2012, pp. 83-103.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year.* New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Etter-Lewis, Gwendolyn. "Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts." *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History,* edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, Routledge, 1991, pp. 43-58.

Eyer, Diane. *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What's Wrong with Society.* Crown, 1996.

Federico, Annette R. *Gilbert and Gubar's the Madwoman in the Attic after Thirty Years.* University of Missouri Press, 2011, pp. 1-26.

Fellizar, Kristine. "What Sex was Like in the '90s." *Bustle.* 23 Oct. 2015, www.bustle.com /articles/118897-what-sex-was-like-in-the-90s.

Ferree, Myra Marx, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess. *Revisioning Gender*. AltaMira Press, 1998.

Fine, Ken. "Evangelicals in the Age of Trump (Or, Why I Was Called a 'Jew-Boy' at a Franklin

    Graham Rally)." *Indy Week.* n.d, www.indyweek.com/indyweek/evangelicals-in-the-age-

    of-trump-or-why-i-was-called-a-jew-boy-at-a-franklin-graham-

    rally/Content?oid=5077274.

Firestone, Lisa. "Breaking the Fantasy Bond with our Mothers." *PsycheAlive: Psychology for*

    Everyday Life. 2006, www.psychalive.org/breaking-the-fantasy-bond-with-our-mothers/**.**

Fitch, Janet. *White Oleander.* Back Bay Books, 2000.

Flax, Jane, "Reentering the Labyrinth: Revisiting Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the*

    Minotaur." *Signs* vol. 27, no.4, 2002, pp. 1037-55. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.1086/339637.

Flynn, Tom. *Gifted.* Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

Foster, M. Marie Booth. "Voice, Mind, Self: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The*

    Joy Luck Club and *The Kitchen God's Wife*" *Amy Tan. Bloom's Modern Critical Views,*

    edited by Stephen Bloom, Infobase Publishing, pp. 95- 112. 2009.

Fraktman, Marilyn G. "Immigrant Mothers: What Makes Them High Risk?" *Mothering Against*

    the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers, edited by Cynthia García Coll, Janet

    L. Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten, The Guilford Press, 1998, pp. 85-112.

Frankenberg, Ruth. *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Duke

    University Press, 1999.

---"White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness." *Critical White Studies:*

    Looking Behind the Mirror, edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Temple

    University Press, 1997, pp. 632-4.

Freud, Hendrika C. "Childbirth and Depression." *Electra vs. Oedipus: The Drama of the Mother-*

    Daughter Relationship, translated by Marjolijn de Jager, Routledge, 2011, pp. 109-25.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton, 1963.

Garcia-Rodriguez, Antonia and Maria Antonia Rodriguez. "The Power of Two: Mothers and

Daughters in El Caribe." *International Journal of Business, Humanities and Technology,*

vol. 3, no. 8, 2013*,* pp. 71-5, www.ijbhtnet.com/journals/ Vol_3_No_8_ December_

2013/8.pdf.

Galanti, Geri-Ann. "The Hispanic Family and Male-Female Relationships: An Overview."

Journal of Transcultural Nursing, vol. 14, no. 3, 2003*,* pp. 180-5. *Sage Journals,* doi:

10.1177/ 1043659 603014003004.

Gammage, Marquita Marie. *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of*

Black Womanhood. Routeledge, 2016.

Gantt, Patricia M. "'Against Regulations': Southern Women in the Fiction of Rebecca Wells."

Songs of the New South: Writing Contemporary Louisiana, edited by Suzanne Disheroon

Green and Lisa Abney, Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 163-71.

García, Cristina. *The Agüero Sisters.* Knopf, 1997.

--- *Dreaming in Cuban.* Turtleback, 1993.

Gatrell, Caroline. "Cybermothering." *Encyclopedia of Motherhood Volume 1*, edited by Andrea

O'Reilly, Sage Publications, Inc., 2010, pp. 261-3.

Gibson, Kyle. "Making Maladaptation Palatable: Fictive Kinship in Adoption and Religion."

2005, n.pag.static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/384896/15481602/1323212200077/

Gibson_FictiveKinship-Making-Maladaptation-Palatable.pdf?token= eX3H3pqQsaF451k

HtE743fsUQ aw %3D.

Gilbert, Sandra M and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the*

Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. Yale Nota, 2000.

Gilligan, Carol Nona Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer. *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Split Household, Small Producer and Dual Wage Earner: An Analysis of Chinese-American Family Strategies." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1983, pp. 35-46. *JSTOR,* doi: 10.2307/351293.

Goines, Janice L. *Reframing Maternal Subjectivities and Difference: Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Cinema.* 2004. University of Auckland, Doctoral Thesis, researchspace. auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/1237.

Gomez, Alma, Cherríe Moraga, and Marianna Romo-Camma. *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas.* Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983.

Gordon, Lewis R. "A Short History of the 'Critical' in Critical Race Theory." *American Philosophy Association Newsletter* vol. 98 no. 2, 1999, n. pag, www.habermas.org /critraceth01bk.htm.

Gorton, Ceri Martha. *"The Things that Attach People": A Critical Literary Analysis of the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver.* 2009. University of Nottingham, Doctoral Dissertation, eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/10758/1/Ceri_Gorton_PhD_Thesis.pdf.

Gray, Frances. *Jung, Irigaray, Individuation: Philosophy, Analytical Psychology, and the Question of the Feminine.* Routledge, 2008.

Griffin, Kimberly A. and Ivory A. Toldson. "Reflections on Mentoring for Blacks in Academia (Editor's Commentary)." *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2012, pp. 103–5. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.81.2.0103.

Griffin, Kimberly A. "Voices of the 'Othermothers': Reconsidering Black Professors'
Relationships with Black Students as a Form of Social Exchange." *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2013, pp. 169–183. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/ jnegroeducation. 82.2.0169.

Green, Fiona Joy. "Cultural Bearing." *Encyclopedia of Motherhood Volume 1*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Sage Publications, Inc., 2010, pp. 260-1.

Greene, Gayle. "Review: *Family Plots*." *The Women's Review of Books,* vol. 7, no. 5, 1990, pp. 8-9. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/4020668.

Greenman, Emily. "Asian American-White Differences in the Effect of Mothering on Career Outcomes." *Work and Occupations,* vol, 38, no. 1, 2011, pp. 37-67, doi:10.1177 /07308 88410384935.

Grimké, Angelina Emily. *Appeal to Christian Women of the South.* New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836. *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture,* edited by Stephen Railton and the University of Virginia, utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesaegat.html.

Guiffrida, Douglas. "Othermothering as a Framework for Understanding African American Students' Definitions of Student-Centered Faculty." *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 76, no. 6, 2005, pp. 701–23. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3838783.

Gurman, Alan S and David P Kniskern. *Handbook Of Family Therapy.* Routledge, 1981.

Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. Vintage, 1977.

Haddox, Thomas F. "Toward Catholicism as Lifestyle: Walker Percy, John Kennedy Toole, and Rebecca Wells." *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South*. Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 145-84.

Hamkins, SuEllen and Renee Schultz. *The Mother Daughter Project: How Mothers and Daughters Can Band Together, Beat the Odds, and Thrive Through Adolescence.* Penguin Group, 2007.

Hanauer, Cathi. *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth about Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage.* William Morrow Paperbacks, 2003.

Hanisberg, Julia E. and Sara Ruddick. *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas.* Beacon Press, 1999.

Harris, Jennifer and Elwood Watson. "Introduction." *The Oprah Phenomenon.* University Press of Kentucky, 2009, pp. 1-34.

Harris, Kate. "Motherhood as Vocation" *Q Ideas*. 2014, n. pag. qideas.org/articles/motherhood-as-vocation/.

Hays, Sharon. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Yale University Press, 1998.

Héloïse Meire. "Women, a Dark Continent? *The Poisonwood Bible* as a Feminist Response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness." Seeds of Change: Critical Essays on Barbara Kingsolver,* edited by Priscilla Gay Leder, University of Tennessee Press, 2010, pp. 71- 86.

Hemmett, Roberta F. and Audrey Dentith. "Some Lessons Before Dying: Gender, Morality, and the Missing Critical Discourse in Oprah's Book Club." *The Oprah Phenomenon*, edited by Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson, University Press of Kentucky, 2009, pp. 207-26.

Hennessy, Judith. *Work and Family Commitments of Low-Income and Impoverished Women: Guilt Is for Mothers with Good Jobs.* Lexington Books, 2015.

Herst, Charney. *For Mothers of Difficult Daughters: How to Enrich and Repair the Relationship in Adulthood.* Villard Books, 1998.

Hill, Catey. "More Americans Relocating for New Jobs." *Market Watch*, 6 Mar. 2014.

>www.marketwatch.com/story/more-americans-relocating-for-new-jobs-2014-03-04.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother / Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.* Indiana

>University Press, 1989.

Hirschman, Elizabeth *C.* "Men, Dogs, Guns, and Cars--The Semiotics of Rugged Individualism."

>*Journal of Advertising,* vol. 32, no. 1, 2003, pp. 9-22, dx.doi.org/10.1080/

>00913367.2003.10601001.

Ho, Wendy. *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing.*

>AltaMira Press, 2000.

Hochschild, Arlie. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home,* Penguin

>Books, 2012.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Routledge, 2014.

Horowitz, Ruth. *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community*.

>Rutgers, 1992.

Howe, Louise Kapp. *Pink Collar Workers.* Avon Books, 1978.

Huda, Parvin R. "Singled Out: A Critique of the Representations of Single Motherhood in

>Welfare Discourse." *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law,* vol. 7, no. 2,

>2001, pp. 341-81, scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1212&

>context=wmjowl.

Huerta, Dolores. "Chicana Feminisms - The Importance Of Culture." 2016, n. pag,

>science.jrank.org/pages/9351/Chicana-Feminisms-Importance-Culture.html.

Huntley, E.D. "*The Kitchen God's Wife*." *Amy Tan*. Greenwood Press, 1998, pp. 79-112.

Husbands, Leslie. "Blogging the Maternal: Self-Representations of the Pregnant and Postpartum

>Body." *Atlantis* vol. 32, no. 2, 2008, pp. 68-78.

Ingman, Heather. *Mothers and Daughters in the Twentieth Century: A Literary Anthology.*

>Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Jacobs, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself.* Brown Books, 2012.

Jelm, Eric. "Fictive Kinship and Acquaintance Networks as Sources of Support and Social

>Capital for Mexican Transmigrants in South Bend." *Institute for Latino Studies*

>*University of Notre Dame Student Research Series.* May 2010, n. pag,

>latinostudies.nd.edu/assets/95249/ original/3.7_ fictive_kinship_and_ acquaintance_

>networks.pdf.

Johnson, Chrystal S. "Finding Our Place: Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Teacher

>Personal Theorizing to Investigate Black Theories of Character Development." *Journal*

>*of Research in Character Education,* vol. 11, no. 1, 2015**,** edited by Jacques S. Benninga

>and Marvin W. Berkowitz**,** Information Age Publishing, 2015, pp. 49-70.

Johnson, Miriam. *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality.* University of

>California Press, 1990.

Joseph, Gloria I. and Jill Lewis. "Mothers, Daughters, and Feminism." *Common Differences:*

>*Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives,* South End Press, 1999. pp. 127-51.

Juffer, Jane. "Domestic Intellectuals: Freedom and the Single Mom." *Maternal Theory: Essential*

>*Readings,* edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Demeter Press, 2007, pp. 726-55.

Juhasz, Suzanne. "Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity." *Studies in*

>*Gender and Sexuality,* vol. 4, no .4, 2003, pp. 395-425. *Taylor and Francis Online*,

>doi.org/10.1080/ 15240650409349236.

Jung, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,* translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton

     University Press, 1981.

Junquera, Imelda Martín. "Teaching Chicana Literature from a Gender and Queer Perspective."

     American@, vol. III , no 1, ISSN:1695-7814, www.uhu.es/hum676/revista/imelda.pdf.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and*

     Melodrama. Routledge, 1992.

Karberg, Elizabeth and Natasha Cabrera. "Latino Father Involvement in the United States."

     Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development, 2016, www.child-

     encyclopedia.com/sites/ default/files/textes-experts/en/4513/latino-father-involvement-in-

     the-united-states.pdf.

Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen.*

     University of Texas Press, 2011.

Kay, Linda. "My Mom and Oprah Winfrey: Her Appeal to White Women." *The Oprah*

     Phenomenon, edited by Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson, University Press of

     Kentucky, 2009, pp. 51-64.

Kelsky, Jaime L., "What Happened to Mother? Patriarchy, Oppression, and Reconciliation in

     Janet Fitch's *White Oleander.*" 2004. Florida State University Master's Thesis,

     fsu.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fsu:181549/datastream/PDF/view.

Kinser, Amber E. *Motherhood and Feminism*. Seal Press, 2010.

King, Deborah K. "Mom-in-Chief: Community Othermothering and Michelle Obama." *Race in*

     the Age of Obama, edited by Donald Cunnigen and Marino A. Bruce, Emerald Group

     Publishing Limited, 2010, pp. 76-126.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible.* Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

Kingston, Anne. *The Meaning of Wife.* Picador, 2006.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts.* Picador,

    1981.

Kirby, Jacqueline. "Single-parent Families in Poverty." *The Ohio State University,*

    www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/bulletin/volume.1/bulletin.htm.

Klein, Mélanie. *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*. The Free Press, 1984.

Kohls, L. Robert. "The Values Americans Live By." 1988, www1.cmc.edu/pages /faculty/alee/

    extra/American_values.html.

Kuwabong, Dannabang. "Mother as Transformer: Strategic Symbols of Matrilineage

    Recuperation in Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots." *From Motherhood to*

    Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, edited by Andre O'Reilly,

    State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 89-102.

Laird, Sam. "The Rise of the Mommy Blogger." *Mashable*, 8 May 2012, mashable.com/2012/

    05/08/mommy-blogger-infographic/#QTuYiajQPkqw.

Landry, Denys. "Maternal Blitz: Harriet Lovatt as Postpartum Sufferer in Doris Lessing's the

    Fifth Child." *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's*

    Literatures, edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, Wilfrid Laurier

    University Press, 2011, pp. 157-68.

Lareau, Annette: *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. University of California

    Press, 2003.

"Latino Hunger Facts." *Feeding America*. 2016, www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-

    america/impact-of-hunger/latino-hunger/latino-hunger-fact-sheet.html.

Lavender, Catherine. "The Cult of Domesticity & True Womanhood Defined by Catherine

    Lavender." n.d., faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/cult_of_domesticity.htm.

Lazarre, Jane. *The Mother Knot*. Duke University Press, 1976.

Lenchek, Lenk. "La Malinche – Harlot of Heronie?" *Mexconnect.* Dec. 1997, www.mexconnect

    .com/articles/224-la-malinche-harlot-or-heroine.

Lenhart, Amanda. "Teen, Social Media and Technology Overview 2015." *Pew Research Center*,

    April 2015, www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/.

Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook.* Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

Levin-Epstein, Amy. "Important Truths and Myths of Working Motherhood." *CNS News*, 25

    Feb, 2013, www.cbsnews.com/news/important-truths-and-myths-of-working-

    motherhood/.

Lewin, Tamar. "'Mommy Career Track' Sets Off a Furor." *The New York Times,* 8 Mar. 1989,

    www.nytimes.com/1989/03/08/us/mommy-career-track-sets-off-a-furor.html.

Lindsey, Linda Lee. *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. Routledge, 2014.

Long, Heather. "Americans Love to Ask People 'What Do You Do'? It's a Habit We Should

    Break." *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentis

    free/2014/mar/08/americans-job-uncertainty-looking-for-new-life-meaning.

Lowinsky, Naomi. "Mother of Mothers, Daughter of Daughters: Reflections on the Motherline."

    Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation, edited by

    Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000, pp.

    227-35.

Luis, William. "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.*" *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2000, pp. 839–49. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/3299671.

Mackinnon, Catharine A. "From Practice to Theory, of What Is A White Woman Anyway?" *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror,* edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Temple University Press, 1997, pp. 300-3.

Macmillan Dictionary. Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2009–2016, www.macmillandictionary.com/us.

Maglin, Nan Bauer. "'Don't never forget the bridge that you crossed over on': The Literature of Matrilineage." *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature,* Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, Ungar Pub Co, 1980, pp. 257-67.

Mansky, Lauri. *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties.* New York University Press, 1996.

Marlow, Cameron. "How Diverse is Facebook?" *Facebook.* 16 Dec. 2009**,** www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-science/how-diverse-is-facebook/205925658858/.

McCoy, Tracey Harrington. "Facebook Moms: My Girl's Smarter than Yours." *Newsweek*, 4 Oct. 2013, www.newsweek.com/2013/10/04/facebook-moms-238042.html.

McDowell, Deborah E. "Reading Family Matters." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, edited by Cheryl A. Wall, Rutgers UP, 1989, pp. 75-97.

Mcelwee, Sean. "The Myth Destroying America: Why Social Mobility is Beyond Ordinary People's Control." *Salon,* 7 Mar. 2015, www.salon.com/2015/03/07/the_myth_destroying_america_why_social_mobility_is_beyond_ordinary_peoples_control/.

McGinn, Kathleen L., Mayra Ruiz Castro, and Elizabeth Long Lingo. "Mums the Word! Cross-national Effects of Maternal Employment on Gender Inequalities at Work and at Home." Harvard Business School Working Paper, no. 15-094, June 2015. (Revised July 2015,) dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/16727933/15-094%20%282%29.pdf?sequence=4.

McIntyre, Alice. *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*. State University of New York Press, 1997.

Meire, Héloïse. "Women, a Dark Continent? The Poisonwood Bible as a Feminist Response to Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Seeds of Change: Critical Essays on Barbara Kingsolver,* edited by Priscilla Leder, University of Tennessee Press, 2012, pp. 71-86.

Meredith, Leslie. "Moms Rely on Facebook More than Other Women." *Tech News Daily*, 12 Apr. 2013, www.nbcnews.com/id/47041243/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets /t/moms-rely-facebook-more-other-women/.

Metzl, Jonathan. "The New Science of Blaming Moms." *MSNBC*. 21 July 2014, www.msnbc.com /melissa-harris-perry/the-new-science-blaming-moms.

Miller, Claire Cain. "Mounting Evidence of Advantages for Children of Working Mothers." *The New York Times*. 15 May, 2015.

Mitchell, Colter, Daniel Notterman, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, John Hobcraft, Irwin Garfinkel, Kate Jaeger, Iulia Kotenko and Sara McLanahan. "Role of Mother's Genes and Environment in Postpartum Depression." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 108, no. 20. 2011, pp. 8189-8193. *PubMed,* doi: 10.1073/pnas.1014129108.

Mitchell, David T. "The Accent of 'Loss': Cultural Crossings as Context in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents." Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context,* edited by Timothy Powell, Rutgers University Press, 1999, pp. 165-84.

"Moms and Media 2015." *Edison Research,* www.edisonresearch.com/wpcontent/ uploads/2015/05/ Moms-and-Media-2015-Final.pdf.

Morales, Aurora Levins. "…And Even Fidel Can't Change That!" *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, State University of New York Press, 2015, pp. 48-52.

Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist.* Vintage, 1978.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004.

---*Sula*. Vintage, 2004.

--- "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." The Tanner Lectures On Human Values, 7 Oct. 1988, The University of Michigan, tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf.

Moshtag, Nahaleh. "The Repression of the Bad Oedipal Mother in Psychoanalysis." May 2016, no. 2, *Psychoanalytic Discourse /Discours Psychanalytique,* psychoanalytic discourse.com /index.php/psad /article/view/33/67.

Mosteller, Rachel. "3 Reasons Moms are Addicted to the Internet." *Parenting.* 2016, www.parenting.com/article/3-reasons-moms-are-addicted-to-the-internet**.**

"Motherhood Today: Tougher Challenges, Less Success: Mom's Biggest Critics Today are Middle Aged Women." *Pew Research Center*. 2 May 2007, www.pewsocialtrends.org /2007/05/02/motherhood- today-tougher-challenges-less-success/.

"Mothers of Intention: Five Bloggers on Race and Erasure in the Mommy Blogosphere." *Bitch*. 18 Aug. 2011, bitchmedia.org/article/mothers-of-intention.

Mujcinovic, Fatima. "Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma." *MELUS*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2003, pp. 167–86. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/3595305.

Najmi, Samina and Rajini Srikanth. *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and Ethical Action in Literature.* State University of New York Press, 2002.

Nanda, Serena. "Multiple Genders among North American Indians." *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations.* Waveland Press, Inc., 2000, pp. 11-23.

Nathman, Avital Norman. *The Good Mother Myth: Redefining Motherhood to Fit Reality.* Seal Press, 2013.

"Native Daughters." *University of Nebraska*. n.d, cojmc.unl.edu/nativedaughters/ storytellers/native-storytellers-connect-the-past-and-the-future.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find." *The Complete Stories: Flannery O'Connor,* edited by Sally Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. pp. 117-133.

--- "Good Country People," edited by Nina Maym. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* Seventh Edition Volume 3. W. W. Norton and Company, 2007, pp. 2529-43.

O'Connor, Pat. *Friendships between Women.* The Guilford Press, 1992.

Ognibene, Elaine R. "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*." *College Literature,* vol. 30, no. 3, 2003, pp. 19-36. *Project Muse,* doi: doi.org/ 10.1353/lit.2003.0047.

Oishi, Shigehiro and Selin Kesebir "Optimal Social-Networking Strategy Is a Function of

 Socioeconomic Conditions." *Psychological Science,* vol. 23, no. 12, 2012, pp. 1542-8.

 PubMed, doi: 10.1177/0956797612446708.

Ola-Ojo, <u>Oluwakemi</u>, *Good Mums, Bad Mums*. Protokos Publishers, 2005.

Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. Dell Publishing Co, 1978.

O'Reilly, Andrea. "Across the Divide: Contemporary Anglo-American Feminist Theory on the

 Mother-Daughter Relationship." *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and*

 Patterns, edited by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, Second Story Press, 1998, pp.

 69-91.

--- *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*. Sage Publications, 2010.

--- *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born.* State

 University of New York Press, 2004.

--- "'I come from a long line of Uppity Irate Black Women': African American Feminist

 Thought on Motherhood, the Motherline, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship.

 Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation, edited by

 Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000, pp.

 143-59.

--- *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings.* Demeter Press, 2007.

--- and Sharon Abbey. *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation.*

 Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.

---"The Motherhood Memoir and the 'New Momism': Biting the Hand that Feeds You." *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011, pp. 203-14.

--- "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century." *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 366-80.

Palmer, Phyllis. *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States 1920-1945.* Temple University Press, 1989.

Parker, Lonnae O'Neal. *I'm Every Woman: Remixed Stories of Marriage, Motherhood, and Work.* Amistad, 2005.

Phillips, Shelley. *Beyond the Myths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Psychology, History, Literature, and Everyday Life.* Penguin Books, 1991.

Philyaw, Deesha. "'Ain't I a Mommy?': Why Are So Few Motherhood Memoirs Penned by Women of Color?" *Bitch.* 23 Feb. 2016. bitchmedia.org/article/aint-i-a-mommy-0.

Podnieks, Elizabeth. *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture.* Mcgill Queens University Press, 2012.

Podnieks, Elizabeth and Andrea O'Reilly. *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures.* Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011.

--- "Introduction: Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives." *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures,* edited by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011, pp. 1-27.

"Population Profile of the United States: America at the Close of the 20th Century."

>Current Population Reports Special Studies. U.S. Census Bureau. Mar. 2001. pp. 1-80.

>www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p23-205.pdf.

Porter, Marie and and Julie Kelso. *Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities*. Cambridge

>Scholars Publishing, 2008.

"Progress in Increasing Breastfeeding and Reducing Racial/Ethnic Differences — United States,

>2000–2008 Births." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, vol. 62, no. 5, 2013, pp.

>77-80. www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6205a1.htm.

Purkayastha, Bandana, Miho Iwata, Shweta Majumdar Adur, Ranita Ray, and Trisha Tiamzon.

>*As the Leaves Turn Gold: Asian Americans and Experiences of Aging*. Rowman and

>Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of*

>*Democracy,* vol. 6, no.1, 1995, pp. 65-78. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0002.

Quintana, Alvina. "Politics, Representation, and the Emergence of a Chicana Aesthetic."

>*Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1990, pp. 257-63. dx.doi.org/10.1080/095023890004

>90211.

"RACE - The Power of an Illusion BACKGROUND: A Long History of Affirmative Action –

>For Whites." *California Newsreel.* 2003. newsreel.org/guides/race/whiteadv.htm.

Reeves, Richard V. "The Other American Dream: Social Mobility, Race and Opportunity."

>*Brookings*, 28 Aug. 2013. www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/

>2013/08/28/the-other-american-dream-social-mobility-race-and-opportunity/.

"Relationships after Baby: Fading Friendships?" *What to Expect.* 2017. www.whattoexpect.com

>/first-year/week-37/fading-friendships.aspx.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995.

Robinson, Lori. "Bodies, Southern Nostalgia, and the Construction of Whiteness in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*." *Journal of Popular Culture,* vol. 42, no. 6, 2009, pp. 1115-33. *Academic Search Complete,* doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00725.x.

Rodenas, Adriana Méndez. "Engendering the Nation: The Mother/Daughter Plot in Cuban American Fiction." *Cuban-American Literature and Art: Negotiating Identities*, edited by Isabel Alvarez Borland, pp. 47-60.

Rollins, Judith. *Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers*. Temple Press University, 1985.

Roschelle, Anne R. *No More Kin: Exploring Race, Class, and Gender in Family Networks.* Sage Publications, 1997.

Rosinky, Natalie M. "Mothers and Daughters: Another Minority Group." *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature.* Ungar Pub. Co., 1980, pp. 281-303.

Ross, Ellen. "New Thoughts on 'the Oldest Vocation': Mothers and Motherhood in Recent Feminist Scholarship: Review Essay." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 20, no. 2, 1995, pp. 397-413.

Rowbotham, Shelia. *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. Penguin, 1973.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1989.

Rutter, Michael. "Parent-Child Separation: Psychological Effects on the Children." *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 12, no.4, 1971, pp. 233-60. *Wiley Online Library*, doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.1971.tb01086.x.

Ryan, Maureen. *Journal of American Culture,* vol. 18 no. 4, 1995, pp.77-82, *Academic Search*

   Complete. EBSCO*host*, proxy-iup.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.

   ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9606260008&site=eds-live.

Santiago, Esmerelda and Joie Davidow. *Las Mamis: Favorito Authors Remember Their Mothers*.

   Random House, 2000.

Scafaria, Lorene. *The Meddler*. Sony Pictures Classics, 2015.

Schneider, David M. *A Critique of the Study of Kinship.* University of Michigan Press, 1984.

Scott- Bell, Patricia. *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters.*

   Beacon Press, 1991.

Schoeffel, Melissa. "Politics and Motherhood in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs*

   in Heaven." *Maternal Conditions: Reading Kingsolver, Castillo, Erdrich, and Ozeki*.

   Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2008, pp. 17-44.

Schwartz, Felice N. "Management Women and the New Facts of Life." *Harvard Business*

   Review, 1989.

Secunda, Victoria. *When You and Your Mother Can't Be Friends: Resolving the Most*

   Complicated Relationship of Your Life. Dell Publishing, 1990.

Segura, Denise A. and Jennifer L. Pierce. "Chicana/o Family Structure and Gender Personality:

   Chodorow, Familism, and Psychoanalytic Sociology Revisited." *Signs,* vol. 19, no. 1,

   1993, pp. 62-91. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/3174745.

Servon, Lisa J and Randal D. Pinkett. "Narrowing the Digital Divide: The Potential and Limits

   of the US Community Technological Movement." *The Network Society,* edited by

   Manuel Castells, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2004, pp. 319-38.

Silbergleid, Robin. "'Oh Baby!': Representations of Single Mothers in American Popular

> Culture." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present),* vol. 1,

> no. 2, 2002, www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/silbergleid.htm.

Skogrand, Linda, Daniel Hatch, and Archana Singh. "Understanding Latino Families,

> Implications for Family Education." *Family Resources*, July 2005,

> extension.usu.edu/files/publications/ publication/FR_Family_2005-02.pdf

Slater, Philip Elliot. *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point.* Beacon

> Press, 1970.

Slipp, Samuel. *The Freudian Mystique: Freud, Women, and Feminism.* NYU Press, 1993.

Smith-Rosenberg, Caroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in

> Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs,* vol. 1*,* no. 1, 1975, pp. 1-29. *JSTOR,*

> www.jstor.org/stable/3172964.

Solinger, Rickie. *Reproductive Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know.* Oxford University

> Press, 2013.

Spelman, Elizabeth V. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Beacon

> Press, 1990.

Sprenger, Stephanie. *So Glad They Told Me: Women Get Real About Motherhood.* The

> HerStories Project Press, 2016.

Steiner, Leslie Morgan. *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their

> Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*. Random House, 2007.

Steven, Evelyn. "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo." *Female and Male in Latin

> America*, edited by Ann Pescatello. University of Pittsburg Press, 1973, pp. 9-16.

Stevens, Lauren. "The Dark Side of Mommy Blogs." *Huffington Post.* 23 Dec, 2014,

      www.huffingtonpost.com/lauren-stevens/the-dark-side-of-mommy-bl_b_6033224.html.

      Accessed 1 Oct. 2016.

Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*. New York: Penguin Group Inc, 2009.

Strasser, Susan. *Never Done: A History of American Housework.* Pantheon, 1982.

Szolnoki, Jennifer and Katharine Cahn. "African American Kinship Caregivers: Principles for

      Developing Supportive Programs." *Guidelines for Family Support Practice.* Family

      Resource Coalition, 2001, pp. 1-15, www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/African

      AmericanKinship.pdf.

Tan, Amy. "Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects." *The Three Penny Review*, no. 67,

      1996, pp. 5-9. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/4384553.

--- *The Kitchen God's Wife.* Penguin Books, 2006.

Taylor, Robert Joseph, Linda M. Chatters, Amanda Toler Woodward, and Edna Brown. "Racial

      and Ethnic Differences in Extended Family, Friendship, Fictive Kin and Congregational

      Informal Support Networks." *Family Relations,* vol. 62, no. 4, 2013, pp. 609-24. *Wiley*

      Online Library, doi: 10.1111/fare.12030.

Taylor, Shelley E., Laura Cousino Klein, Brian P. Lewis, Tara L. Gruenewald, Regan A. R.

      Gurung, and John A. Updegraff. "Biobehavioral Responses to Stress in Females: Tend-

      and-Befriend, Not Fight-or-Flight." *Psychological Review,* vol. 107, no. 3, 2000, pp. 411-

      29. *PubMed,* dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.107.3.411.

"The Rise of Asian Americans." Pew Research Center. 4 Apr. 2013, www.pewsocialtrends.org

      /2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/.

"Themes." "*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* Themes." *GradeSaver.* 2016.

Thurer, Shari L. "The Myths of Motherhood." *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by

      Andrea O'Reilly, Demeter Press, 2007, pp. 331-344.

Todd, Suzanne and Bill Block. *Bad Moms*. PalmStarMedia, 2016.

Tong, Rosemarie. "Multicultural, Global, and Postcolonial Feminism." *Feminist Thought: A*

      More Comprehensive Introduction. Westview Press, 2009, pp. 200-36.

Travis, Trysh. "Is *The Help* Realistic? It Depends." *Black Past.org* 2015, www.blackpast.org/

      perspectives/help-realistic-it-depends.

---"Divine Secrets of the Cultural Studies Sisterhood: Women Reading Rebecca Wells."

      American Literary History, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 134-161. *Project Muse,*

      muse.jhu.edu/article/38851.

Trigo, Benigno. *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American*

      Women's Writing. Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

Tucker, Judith Stadtman. "From 'Choice' to Change. Rewriting the Script of Motherhood as

      Maternal Activism." *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy,*

      Agency, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 293-307.

Turnage, Barbara, "The Global Self-Esteem of an African-American Adolescent Female and Her

      Relationship with Her Mother." *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and*

      Transformation, edited by Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, Rowman & Littlefield

      Publishers Inc., 2000, pp. 175-87.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 2nd edition. Routledge, 2006.

Umansky, Lauri. *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties*. NYU Press,

      1996.

Valenti, Jessica. "Sexism is Making Women Sick." *The Guardian.* 26 Jan. 2015, www.the guardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/26/sexism-is-making-women-sick.

Veciana-Suárez, Ana. *The Chin Kiss King.* Plume, 1998.

Vespa, Jonathan, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider. "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012 Population Characteristics." US *Census Bureau.* Aug. 2013, www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf.

Villarruel, Francisco A. and Jaime Chahin. "Beyond the Myths: Paternal Values of Latino Fathers." *Michigan Family Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1997, pp. 17-30, hdl.handle.net/ 2027/spo. 4919087. 0003.103.

Waldman, Ayelet. *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace.* Anchor, 2010.

Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose.* Mariner Books, 2003, pp. 231-43.

--- *The Color Purple.* Mariner Books, 2003.

Walters, Marianne. "Mothers and Daughters." *The Invisible Web: Gender Patterns in Family Relationships,* edited by Marianne Walters, Betty Carter, Peggy Papp, and Olga Silverstein, The Guilford Press, 1991, pp. 33-89.

Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture.* University of California Press, 1994.

Ward, Dawn and Jack Balswick. "Strong Men and Virtuous Women: A Content Analysis of Sex Roles Stereotypes." *The Pacific Sociological Review,* vol. 21, no. 1, 1978, pp. 45-53. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/1388866.

Weaver, Gary R. "American Cultural Values." *Kokusai Bunka Kenshu (Intercultural Training),* 1997, vol. 14, pp. 14-20, www.baraka.consulting/uploads/American%20 Cultural%20Values.pdf.

Weingarten, Kathy. "Sidelined No More: Promoting Mothers of Adolescents as a Resource for Their Growth and Development." *Mothering against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers,* edited Cynthia García Coll, Janet L. Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten, The Guilford Press, 1998, pp. 15-36.

---, Janet L. Surrey, Cynthia García Coll, and Mary Watkins. "Introduction." *Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers,* edited by Cynthia García Coll, Janet L. Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten, The Guilford Press, 1998, pp. 1-14.

Wells, Rebecca. *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Harper Perennial, 1999.

--- *Little Altars Everywhere*. Harper Perennial, 2005.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151-174. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/2711179.

Wildman, Stephanie M. "Reflections on Whiteness: The Case of Latinos(as.)" *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror,* edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, Temple University Press, 1997, pp. 323-26.

Wilcox, W. Bradford. "Religion and the Domestication of Men." Contexts: *Understanding People in Their Social Worlds* vol. 5, no. 4, 2006, pp. 42–46. *Sage Journals,* journals.sagepub.com/ doi/pdf/10.1525/ctx.2006.5.4.42.

Wilkinson, Stephanie and Jennifer Niesslein. "Motherhood and Book Publishing," *Brain, Child,* Spring 2005, pp. 203-24.

Willie, Charles V and Richard J. Reddick. *A New Look at Black Families.* Rowman &
Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2010.

Williams, Joan. *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It.*
Oxford University Press, 2001.

Wilson, Mary Ann. "Living on the Edge in Rebecca Wells's *Little Altars Everywhere.*" *Songs of
the New South: Writing Contemporary Louisiana*, edited by Suzanne Disheroon Green
and Lisa Abney, Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 3-9.

Winnicott, D.W. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-
Me Possession." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis,* vol. 34, 1953, pp. 89-97.
PubMed, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/13061115.

Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia. "'Sugar Sister: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." *Amy Tan.
Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, pp. 49-84.

"Working Mothers Issue Brief." *Women's Bureau U.S. Department of Labor.* June 2016. pp. 1-
14, www.dol.gov/wb/resources/WB_WorkingMothers_508_FinalJune13.pdf.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own.* Albatross Publishers, 2015.

Wylie, Philip. *Generation of Vipers.* Farrar & Rinehart Inc, 1942.

Yuh, Ji-Yeon. "Out of the Shadows: Camptown Women, Military Brides, and Korean
(American) Communities." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader,* edited by
Thomas Chen, New Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 213-38.

Yu, Yi-Lin. "Diasporic Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary North American Women's
Fiction." *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing.*
Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005, pp. 125-78.

Yung, Judy. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. University of California Press, 1995.

Zayas, Luis H., Charlotte L. Bright, Thyria Álvarez-Sánchez, and Leopoldo J. Cabassa. "Acculturation, Familism and Mother-Daughter Relations among Suicidal and Non-Suicidal Adolescent Latinas." *The Journal of Primary Prevention,* vol. 30, no. 3-4, 2009, pp. 351–69. *PMC*, doi: 10.1007/s10935-009-0181-0.

Zhou, Min and Jenifer Lee. "Assessing what is Cultural about Asian Americans' Academic Advantage." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America*, vol. 111, no. 23, 2016, pp. 8321-2, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1407309111.

Zill, Nicholas and Marianne Winglee. *Who Reads Literature?: The Future of the United States As a Nation of Readers.* Seven Locks Press, 1990.

Zinn, Maxine Baca and Bonnie Thornton Dill. "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism." *Feminist Studies,* vol. 22, no. 2, 1996, pp. 321-31. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/3178416.

Zong, Jie and Jeanne Batalova. "Asian Immigrants in the United States." *The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute*, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/asian-immigrants-united-states.