

## SHIFTING THE CENTER

### Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood

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*I dread to see my children grow, I know not their fate. Where the white boy has every opportunity and protection, mine will have few opportunities and no protection. It does not matter how good or wise my children may be, they are colored.*

— An anonymous African American mother in 1904  
(reported in LERNER 1972:158)

For Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women, motherhood cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context. Motherhood occurs in specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender, contexts where the sons of white mothers have "every opportunity and protection," and the "colored" daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers "know not their fate." Racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context not only for racial ethnic women in the United States but for all women.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the significance of race and class, feminist theorizing routinely minimizes their importance. In this sense, feminist theorizing about motherhood has not been immune to the decontextualization in Western social thought overall.<sup>2</sup> Although many dimensions of motherhood's context are ignored, the exclusion of race and/or class from feminist theorizing generally and from feminist theorizing about motherhood specifically merits special attention (Spelman 1988).<sup>3</sup>

Much feminist theorizing about motherhood assumes that male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life and that understanding the struggle for individual autonomy in

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the face of such domination is central to understanding motherhood (Eisenstein 1983).<sup>4</sup> Several guiding principles frame such analyses. First, such theories posit a dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities. This juxtaposition of a public, political economy to a private, noneconomic, and apolitical domestic household allows work and family to be seen as separate institutions. Second, reserving the public sphere for men as a "male" domain leaves the private, domestic sphere as a "female" domain. Gender roles become tied to the dichotomous constructions of these two basic societal institutions—men work and women take care of families. Third, the public/private dichotomy separating the family/household from the paid labor market shapes sex-segregated gender roles within the private sphere of the family. The archetypal white, middle-class, nuclear family divides family life into two oppositional spheres—the "male" sphere of economic providing and the "female" sphere of affective nurturing, mainly mothering. This normative family household ideally consists of a working father who earns enough to allow his spouse and dependent children to forgo participation in the paid labor force. Owing in large part to their superior earning power, men as workers and fathers exert power over women in the labor market and in families. Finally, the struggle for individual autonomy in the face of a controlling, oppressive "public" society or the father as patriarch constitutes the main human enterprise.<sup>5</sup> Successful adult males achieve this autonomy. Women, children, and less successful males—namely, those who are working class or from racial ethnic groups—are seen as dependent persons, as less autonomous, and therefore as fitting objects for elite male domination. Within the nuclear family, this struggle for autonomy takes the form of increasing opposition to the mother, the individual responsible for socializing children by these guiding principles (Chodorow 1978; Flax 1978).

Placing the experiences of women of color in the center of feminist theorizing about motherhood demonstrates how emphasizing the issue of father as patriarch in a decontextualized nuclear family distorts the experiences of women in alternative family structures with quite different political economies. While male domination certainly has been an important theme for racial ethnic women in the United States, gender inequality has long worked in tandem with racial domination and economic exploitation. 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 (Collins 1990; Dill 1988; Glenn 1985).

For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concerns of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other. Whether under conditions of the labor exploitation of African American women during slavery and the ensuing tenant farm system, the political conquest of Native American women during European acquisition of land, or exclusionary immigration policies applied to Asian Americans and Latinos, women of color have

performed motherwork within the family as separate spheres, of male and female gender roles as similarly dichotomized, and of the search for autonomy as the guiding human quest. "Women's reproductive labor—that is, feeding, clothing, and psychologically supporting the male wage earner and nurturing and socializing the next generation—is seen as work on behalf of the family as a whole rather than as work benefiting men in particular," observes Asian American sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1986:192). The locus of conflict lies outside the household, as women and their families engage in collective effort to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity. But this "reproductive labor" or "motherwork" goes beyond ensuring the survival of members of one's family. This type of motherwork recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity. . . .

. . . I use the term *motherwork* to soften the dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one's group. Racial ethnic women's mothering and work experiences occur at the boundaries demarking these dualities. "Work for the day to come" is motherwork, whether it is on behalf of one's own biological children, children of one's racial ethnic community, or children who are yet unborn. Moreover, the space that this motherwork occupies promises to shift our thinking about motherhood itself.

### Shifting the Center: Women of Color and Motherwork

What themes might emerge if issues of race and class generally, and understanding racial ethnic women's motherwork specifically, became central to feminist theorizing about motherhood? Centering feminist theorizing on the concerns of white middle-class women leads to two problematic assumptions. The first is that a relative degree of economic security exists for mothers and their children. A second is that all women enjoy the racial privilege that allows them to see themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy instead of members of racial ethnic groups struggling for power. These assumptions allow feminist theorists to concentrate on themes such as the connections among mothering, aggression, and death, the effects of maternal isolation on mother-child relationships within nuclear family households, maternal sexuality, relations among family members, all-powerful mothers as conduits for gender oppression, and the possibilities of an idealized motherhood freed from patriarchy (Chodorow and Contratto 1982; Eisenstein 1983).

Although these issues merit investigation, centering feminist theorizing about motherhood in the ideas and experiences of African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American women might yield markedly different themes (Andersen 1988; Brown 1989). This stance is to be distinguished

from adding racial ethnic women's experiences to preexisting feminist theories without considering how these experiences challenge those theories (Spelman 1988). Involving much more than consulting existing social science sources, placing the ideas and experiences of women of color in the center of analysis requires invoking a different epistemology concerning what type of knowledge is valid. We must distinguish between what has been said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity. Personal narratives, autobiographical statements, poetry, fiction, and other personalized statements have all been used by women of color to express self-defined standpoints on mothering and motherhood. Such knowledge reflects the authentic standpoint of subordinated groups. Placing these sources in the center and supplementing them with statistics, historical material, and other knowledge produced to justify the interests of ruling elites should create new themes and angles of vision (Smith 1990).<sup>6</sup>

Specifying the contours of racial ethnic women's motherwork promises to point the way toward richer feminist theorizing about motherhood. Issues of survival, power, and identity—these three themes form the bedrock of women of color's motherwork. The importance of working for the physical survival of children and community, the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity comprise three core themes characterizing the experiences of Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women. Examining survival, power, and identity reveals how racial ethnic women in the United States encounter and fashion motherwork. But it also suggests how feminist theorizing about motherhood might be shifted if different voices became central in feminist discourse.

## Motherwork and Physical Survival

*When we are not physically starving we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation.*

—MORAGA 1979:29

Physical survival is assumed for children who are white and middle class. Thus, examining their psychic and emotional well-being and that of their mothers appears rational. The children of women of color, many of whom are "physically starving," have no such assurances. Racial ethnic children's lives have long been held in low regard. African American children face an infant mortality rate twice that for white infants. Approximately one-third of Hispanic children and one-half of African American children who survive infancy live in poverty. Racial ethnic children often live in harsh urban environments where drugs, crime, industrial pollutants, and violence threaten their survival. Children in rural environments often fare no better.

Winona LaDuke reports that Native Americans on reservations frequently must use contaminated water. On the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in 1979, for example, 38 percent of all pregnancies resulted in miscarriages before the fifth month or in excessive hemorrhaging. Approximately 65 percent of the children who were born suffered breathing problems caused by underdeveloped lungs and jaundice (LaDuke 1988:63).

Struggles to foster the survival of Native American, Latino, Asian American, and African American families and communities by ensuring the survival of children are a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women's motherwork. African American women's fiction contains numerous stories of mothers fighting for the physical survival both of their own biological children and of those of the larger African American community.<sup>7</sup> "Don't care how much death it is in the land, I got to make preparations for my baby to live!" proclaims Mariah Upshur, the African American heroine of Sara Wright's 1986 novel *This Child's Gonna Live* (p. 143). The harsh climates that confront racial ethnic children require that their mothers, like Mariah Upshur, "make preparations for their babies to live" as a central feature of their motherwork.

Yet, like all deep cultural themes, the theme of motherwork for physical survival contains contradictory elements. On the one hand, racial ethnic women's motherwork for individuals and the community has been essential for their survival. On the other hand, this work often extracts a high cost for large numbers of women, such as loss of individual autonomy or the submersion of individual growth for the benefit of the group. Although this dimension of motherwork is essential, the question of whether women are doing more than their fair share of such work for community development merits consideration.

Histories of family-based labor have shaped racial ethnic women's motherwork for survival and the types of mothering relationships that ensue. African American, Asian American, Native American, and Hispanic women have all worked and contributed to family economic well-being (Dill 1988; Glenn 1985). Much of these women's experiences with motherwork stems from the work they performed as children. The commodification of children of color—from the enslavement of African children who were legally owned as property to the subsequent treatment of children as units of labor in agricultural work, family businesses, and industry—has been a major theme shaping motherhood for women of color. Beginning in slavery and continuing into the post-World War II period, African American children were put to work at young ages in the fields of southern agriculture. Sara Brooks began full-time work in the fields at age eleven and remembers, "We never was lazy 'cause we used to really work. We used to work like mens. Oh, fight sometime, fuss sometime, but worked on" (Collins 1990:54). Black and Latino children in contemporary migrant farm families make similar contributions to their family's economy. "I musta been almost eight when I started following the crops," remembers Jessie de la Cruz, a Mexican American mother with six grown children. "Every winter, up north. I was on

the end of the row of prunes, taking care of my younger brother and sister. They would help me fill up the cans and put 'em in a box while the rest of the family was picking the whole row" (de la Cruz 1980:168). Asian American children spent long hours working in family businesses, child labor practices that have earned Asian Americans the dubious distinction of being "model minorities." More recently, the family-based labor of undocumented racial ethnic immigrants, often mother-child units doing piecework for the garment industry, recalls the sweatshop conditions confronting turn-of-the-century European immigrants.

A certain degree of maternal isolation from members of the dominant group characterizes the preceding mother-child units. For women of color working along with their children, such isolation is more appropriately seen as reflecting the placement of women of color and their children in racially and class-stratified labor systems than as resulting from patriarchal domination. The unit may be isolated, but the work performed by the mother-child unit closely ties the mothering experiences of women of color to wider political and economic issues. Children learn to see their work and that of their mother not as isolated from the wider society but as essential to their family's survival. Moreover, in the case of family agricultural labor or family businesses, women and children worked alongside men, often performing the same work. If isolation occurred, the family, not the mother-child unit, was the focus.

Children working in close proximity to their mothers received distinctive types of mothering. Asian American children working in urban family businesses report long days filled almost exclusively with work and school. In contrast, the sons and daughters of African American sharecroppers and migrant farm children of all backgrounds did not fare as well. Their placement in rural work settings meant that they had less access to educational opportunities. "I think the longest time I went to school was two months in one place," remembers Jessie de la Cruz. "I attended, I think, about forty-five schools. When my parents or my brothers didn't find any work, we wouldn't attend school because we weren't sure of staying there. So I missed a lot of school" (de la Cruz 1980:167-68). It was only in the 1950s that southern school districts stopped the practice of closing segregated African American schools during certain times of the year so that the children could work.

Work that separated women of color from their children also framed the mothering relationship. Until the 1960s, large numbers of African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women worked in domestic service. Even though women worked long hours to ensure their children's physical survival, that same work ironically denied the mothers access to their children. Different institutional arrangements emerged in African American, Latino, and Asian American communities to resolve the tension between maternal separation due to employment and the needs of dependent children. The extended family structure in African American communities endured as a flexible institution that mitigated some of the effects of maternal separation. Grandmothers are highly revered in African American communities, often because they function as primary caretakers of their daughters' and

daughters-in-law's children (Collins 1990). In contrast, exclusionary immigration policies that mitigated against intergenerational family units in the United States led Chinese American and Japanese American families to make other arrangements (Dill 1988).

Some mothers are clearly defeated by this situation of incessant labor performed to ensure their children's survival. The magnitude of their motherwork overwhelms them. But others, even while appearing to be defeated, manage to pass on the meaning of motherwork for survival to their children. African American feminist thinker June Jordan (1985) remembers her perceptions of her mother's work:

As a child I noticed the sadness of my mother as she sat alone in the kitchen at night. . . . Her woman's work never won permanent victories of any kind. It never enlarged the universe of her imagination or her power to influence what happened beyond the front door of our house. Her woman's work never tickled her to laugh or shout or dance. (P. 105)

But Jordan also sees her mother's work as being motherwork that is essential to individual and community survival.

But she did raise me to respect her way of offering love and to believe that hard work is often the irreducible factor for survival, not something to avoid. Her woman's work produced a reliable home base where I could pursue the privileges of books and music. Her woman's work invented the potential for a completely new kind of work for us, the next generation of Black women: huge, rewarding hard work demanded by the huge, different ambitions that her perfect confidence in us engendered.

## Motherwork and Power

*How can I write down how I felt when I was a little child and my grandmother used to cry with us 'cause she didn't have enough food to give us? Because my brother was going barefooted and he was cryin' because he wasn't used to going without shoes? How can I describe that? I can't describe when my little girl died because I didn't have money for a doctor. And never had any teaching on caring for sick babies. Living out in labor camps. How can I describe that?*

—DE LA CRUZ 1980:177

Jessie de la Cruz, a Mexican American woman who grew up as a migrant farm worker, experienced firsthand the struggle for empowerment facing racial ethnic women whose daily motherwork centers on issues of survival. A dialectical relation exists between efforts of racial orders to mold the institution of motherhood to serve the interests of elites, in this case, racial elites, and efforts on the part of subordinated groups to retain power over motherhood so that it serves the legitimate needs of their communities (Collins 1990). African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American

women have long been preoccupied with patterns of maternal power and powerlessness because their mothering experiences have been profoundly affected by this dialectical process. But instead of emphasizing maternal power in dealing either with father as patriarch (Chodorow 1978; Rich 1986) or with male dominance (Ferguson 1989), women of color are concerned with their power and powerlessness within an array of social institutions that frame their lives.

Racial ethnic women's struggles for maternal empowerment have revolved around three main themes. The struggle for control over their own bodies in order to preserve choice over whether to become mothers at all is one fundamental theme. The ambiguous politics of caring for unplanned children has long shaped African American women's motherwork. For example, the widespread institutionalized rape of African American women by white men both during slavery and in the segregated South created countless biracial children who had to be absorbed into African American families and communities (Davis 1981). The range of skin colors and hair textures in contemporary African American communities bears mute testament to the powerlessness of African American women in controlling this dimension of motherhood.

For many women of color, choosing to become a mother challenges institutional policies that encourage white middle-class women to reproduce and discourage low-income racial ethnic women from doing so, even penalizing them (Davis 1981). Rita Silk-Nauni, an incarcerated Native American woman, writes of the difficulties she encountered in trying to have additional children. She loved her son so much that she left him only when she went to work. "I tried having more after him and couldn't," she observes. "I went to a specialist and he thought I had been fixed when I had my Son. He said I would have to have surgery in order to give birth again. The surgery was so expensive but I thought I could make a way even if I had to work 24 hours a day. Now that I'm here, I know I'll never have that chance" (Brant 1988:94). Like Silk-Nauni, Puerto Rican and African American women have long had to struggle with issues of sterilization abuse (Davis 1981). More recently, efforts to manipulate the fertility of poor women dependent on public assistance speaks to the continued salience of this issue in the lives of racial ethnic women.

A second dimension of racial women's struggles for maternal empowerment concerns getting to keep the children that are wanted, whether they were planned for or not. For racial ethnic mothers like Jessie de la Cruz whose "little girl died" because she "didn't have money for a doctor," maternal separation from one's children becomes a much more salient issue than maternal isolation with one's children within an allegedly private nuclear family. Physical or psychological separation of mothers and children designed to disempower racial ethnic individuals forms the basis of a systematic effort to disempower their communities.

For both Native American and African American mothers, situations of conquest introduced this dimension of the struggle for maternal empowerment.

In her fictional account of a Native American mother's loss of her children in 1890, Brant explores the pain of maternal separation. "It has been two days since they came and took the children away. My body is greatly chilled. All our blankets have been used to bring me warmth. The women keep the fire blazing. The men sit. They talk among themselves. We are frightened by this sudden child-stealing. We signed papers, the agent said. This gave them rights to take our babies. It is good for them, the agent said. It will make them civilized" (1988:101). A legacy of conquest has meant that Native American mothers on so-called reservations confront intrusive government institutions such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs in deciding the fate of their children. For example, the long-standing policy of removing Native American children from their homes and housing them in reservation boarding schools can be seen as an effort to disempower their mothers. In the case of African American women under slavery, owners controlled virtually all dimensions of their children's lives — they could be sold at will, whipped, even killed, all with no recourse by their mothers. In such a situation, simply keeping and rearing one's children becomes empowerment.

A third dimension of racial ethnic women's struggles for empowerment concerns the pervasive efforts by the dominant group to control their children's minds. In her short story "A Long Memory," Beth Brant juxtaposes the loss felt in 1890 by a Native American mother whose son and daughter were forcibly removed by white officials to the loss that Brant felt in 1978 when a hearing took away her custody of her daughter. "Why do they want our babies?" queries the turn-of-the-century mother. "They want our power. They take our children to remove the inside of them. Our power" (Brant 1988:105). This mother recognizes that the future of the Native American way of life lies in retaining the power to define that worldview through educating the children. By forbidding children to speak their native languages and in other ways encouraging them to assimilate into Anglo culture, external agencies challenge the power of mothers to raise their children as they see fit.

Schools controlled by the dominant group comprise one important location where this dimension of the struggle for maternal empowerment occurs. In contrast to white middle-class children, whose educational experiences affirm their mothers' middle-class values, culture, and authority, African American, Latino, Asian American and Native American children typically receive an education that derogates their mothers' perspective. For example, the struggles over bilingual education in Latino communities are about much more than retaining Spanish as a second language. Speaking the language of one's childhood is a way of retaining the entire culture and honoring the mother teaching that culture (Anzaldúa 1987; Moraga 1979).

Jenny Yamoto (1988) describes the stress of ongoing negotiations with schools regarding her part African American and part Japanese sons. "I've noticed that depending on which parent, Black mom or Asian dad, goes to school open house, my oldest son's behavior is interpreted as disruptive and irreverent, or assertive and clever. . . . I resent their behavior being defined and even expected on the basis of racial biases their teachers may struggle

with or hold. . . . I don't have the time or energy to constantly change and challenge their teachers' and friends' misperceptions. I only go after them when the children really seem to be seriously threatened" (p. 24).

In confronting each of these three dimensions of their struggles for empowerment, racial ethnic women are not powerless in the face of racial and class oppression. Being grounded in a strong, dynamic, indigenous culture can be central in racial ethnic women's social constructions of motherhood. Depending on their access to traditional culture, women of color invoke alternative sources of power.<sup>8</sup> "Equality per se may have a different meaning for Indian women and Indian people," suggests Kate Shanley (1988). "That difference begins with personal and tribal sovereignty — the right to be legally recognized as people empowered to determine our own destinies" (p. 214). Personal sovereignty involves the struggle to promote the survival of a social structure whose organizational principles represent notions of family and motherhood different from those of the mainstream. "The nuclear family has little relevance to Indian women," observes Shanley. "In fact, in many ways, mainstream feminists now are striving to redefine family and community in a way that Indian women have long known."

African American mothers can draw upon an Afrocentric tradition where motherhood of varying types, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother, can be invoked as a symbol of power. Many African American women receive respect and recognition within their local communities for innovative and practical approaches to mothering not only their own biological children but also the children in their extended family networks and in the community overall. Black women's involvement in fostering African American community development forms the basis of this community-based power. In local African American communities, community othermothers can become identified as powerful figures through furthering the community's well-being (Collins 1990).

Despite policies of dominant institutions that place racial ethnic mothers in positions where they appear less powerful to their children, mothers and children empower themselves by understanding each other's position and relying on each other's strengths. In many cases, children, especially daughters, bond with their mothers instead of railing against them as symbols of patriarchal power. Cherríe Moraga describes the impact that her mother had on her. Because she was repeatedly removed from school in order to work, Moraga's mother would be considered largely illiterate by prevailing standards. But her mother was also a fine storyteller and found ways to empower herself within dominant institutions. "I would go with my mother to fill out job applications for her, or write checks for her at the supermarket," Moraga (1979) recounts. "We would have the scenario all worked out ahead of time. My mother would sign the check before we'd get to the store. Then, as we'd approach the checkstand, she would say — within earshot of the cashier — 'oh honey, you go 'head and make out the check,' as if she couldn't be bothered with such

an insignificant detail" (p. 28). Like Cherríe Moraga and the mothers, many ethnic women's motherwork involves collaborating to empower mothers and children within oppressive structures.

## Motherwork and Identity

*Please help me find out who I am. My mother was Indian, but we were taken from her and put in foster homes. They were white and didn't want to tell us about our mother. I have a name and maybe a place of birth. Do you think you can help me?*

— BRANT 1988:9

Like this excerpt from a letter to an editor, the theme of loss of racial ethnic identity and the struggle to maintain a sense of self and community pervade the remaining stories, poetry, and narratives in Beth Brant's volume, *A Gathering of Spirit*. Carol Lee Sanchez offers another view of the impact of the loss of self. "Radicals look at reservation Indians and get very upset about their poverty conditions," observes Sanchez. "But poverty to us is not the same thing as poverty is to you. Our poverty is that we can't be who we are. We can't hunt or fish or grow our food because our basic resources and the right to use them in traditional ways are denied us" (Brant 1988:165). Racial ethnic women's motherwork reflects the tensions inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color. The racial privilege enjoyed by white middle-class women makes unnecessary this complicated dimension of the mothering tradition of women of color. Although white children can be prepared to fight racial oppression, their survival does not depend on gaining these skills. Their racial identity is validated by their schools, the media, and other social institutions. White children are socialized into their rightful place in systems of racial privilege. Racial ethnic women have no such guarantees for their children. Their children must first be taught to survive in systems that would oppress them. Moreover, this survival must not come at the expense of self-esteem. Thus, a dialectical relation exists between systems of racial oppression designed to strip subordinated groups of a sense of personal identity and a sense of collective peoplehood, and the cultures of resistance to that oppression extant in various racial ethnic groups. For women of color, motherwork for identity occurs at this critical juncture (Collins 1990).

"Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages," observes Mexican American poet Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). "Which was it to be — strong or submissive, rebellious or conforming?" (p. 18). Thus women of color's motherwork requires reconciling two contradictory needs concerning identity. First, preparing children to cope with and survive within systems of racial oppression is essential. The pressures for these children to assimilate are pervasive. In order to compel women of color to participate in their

children's assimilation, dominant institutions promulgate ideologies that belittle people of color. Negative controlling images infuse the worlds of their male and female children (Collins 1990; Green 1990; Tajima 1989). Native American girls are encouraged to see themselves as "Pocahontases" and "squaws"; Asian American girls as "geisha girls" and "Suzy Wongs"; Hispanic girls as "Madonnas" and "hot-blooded whores"; and African American girls as "mammies," "matriarchs," and "prostitutes." Girls of all groups are told that their lives cannot be complete without a male partner and that their educational and career aspirations must always be subordinated to their family obligations.

This push toward assimilation is part of a larger effort to socialize racial ethnic children into their proper subordinate places in systems of racial and class oppression. But despite pressures to assimilate, since children of color can never be white, assimilation by becoming white is impossible. Thus, a second dimension of this mothering tradition involves equipping children with skills to challenge the systems of racial oppression. Girls who become women believing that they are capable only of being maids and prostitutes cannot contribute to racial ethnic women's motherwork. Mothers make varying choices in preparing their children to fit into, yet resist, systems of racial domination. Some mothers remain powerless in the face of external forces that foster their children's assimilation and subsequent alienation from their families and communities. Through fiction, Native American author Beth Brant (1988:102-103) explores the grief felt by a mother whose children had been taken away to live among whites. A letter arrives giving news of her missing son and daughter:

*This letter is from two strangers with the names Martha and Daniel. They say they are learning civilized ways. Daniel works in the fields, growing food for the school. Martha is being taught to sew aprons. She will be going to live with the schoolmaster's wife. She will be a live-in girl. What is live-in girl? I shake my head. The words sound the same to me. I am afraid of Martha and Daniel. These strangers who know my name.*

Other mothers become unwitting conduits of the dominant ideology. "How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *hociconas* (big mouths), for being *callajeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives," asks Gloria Anzaldúa (1987:16).

Some mothers encourage their children to fit in for reasons of survival. "My mother, nursed in the folds of a town that once christened its black babies Lee, after Robert E., and Jackson, after Stonewall, raised me on a dangerous generation's old belief," remembers African American author Marita Golden (1983). "Because of my dark brown complexion, she warned me against wearing browns or yellow and reds. . . . And every summer I was admonished not to play in the sun 'cause you gonna have to get a light husband anyway,

for the sake of your children'" (p. 24). To Cherríe Moraga's mother, "economic level, being Chicana meant being 'less.' It was through my mother's desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became 'anglocized'; the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future" (Moraga 1979:28). Despite their mothers' good intentions, the costs to children taught to submit to racist and sexist ideologies can be high. Raven, a Native American woman, looks back on her childhood: "I've been raised in white man's world and was forbade more or less to converse with Indian people. As my mother wanted me to be educated and live a good life, free from poverty. I lived a life of loneliness. Today I am desperate to know my people" (Brant 1988:221). Raven's mother did what she thought best to help her daughter avoid poverty. But ultimately, Raven experienced the poverty of not being able to be who she was.

Still other mothers transmit sophisticated skills to their children of how one can appear to submit to yet simultaneously challenge oppression. Willi Coleman's mother used a Saturday-night hair-combing ritual to impart an African American women's standpoint to her daughters:

Except for special occasions mama came home from work early on Saturdays. She spent six days a week mopping, waxing and dusting other women's houses and keeping out of reach of other women's husbands. Saturday nights were reserved for "taking care of them girls" hair and the telling of stories. Some of which included a recitation of what she had endured and how she had triumphed over "folks that were lower than dirt" and "no-good snakes in the grass." She combed, patted, twisted and talked, saying things which would have embarrassed or shamed her at other times. (Coleman 1987:34)

Historian Elsa Barkley Brown captures the delicate balance that racial ethnic mothers must achieve. Brown (1989) points out that her mother's behavior demonstrated the "need to teach me to live my life one way and, at the same time, to provide all the tools I would need to live it quite differently" (p. 929).

For women of color, the struggle to maintain an independent racial identity has taken many forms, all revealing varying solutions to the dialectical relation between institutions that would deny their children their humanity and their children's right to exist as self-defined people. Like Willi Coleman's mother, African American women draw upon a long-standing Afrocentric feminist worldview emphasizing the importance of self-definition and self-reliance, and the necessity of demanding respect from others (Collins 1990; Terborg-Penn 1986).

Poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) challenges many of the ideas in Latino cultures concerning women: "Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, . . . I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us" (p. 21). Anzaldúa offers a trenchant analysis of the ways in which the Spanish conquest of Native Americans fragmented women's identity

and produced three symbolic "mothers." *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, perhaps the single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano people, represents the virgin mother who cares for and nurtures an oppressed people. *La Chingada (Malinche)* represents the raped mother, all but abandoned. A combination of the first two, *la Llorona*, symbolizes the mother who seeks her lost children. "Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three 'Our Mothers,'" claims Anzaldúa (1987). "In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted — *Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us a long-suffering people" (p. 31). For Anzaldúa (1987), the Spanish conquest that brought racism and economic subordination to Indian people and created a new mixed-race Latino people simultaneously devalued women:

No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe into which I was born. I can understand why the more tinged with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless sisters glorify their colored culture's values—to offset the extreme devaluation of it by the white culture. It's a legitimate reaction. But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me. (P. 22)

Latino mothers face the complicated task of shepherding their children through the racism of the dominant society and the reactions to that racism framing cultural beliefs internal to Hispanic communities. Many Asian American mothers stress conformity and fitting in as a way to challenge the system. "Our parents are painted as hard workers who were socially uncomfortable and had difficulty expressing even the smallest opinion," observes Japanese American Kesaya Noda in her autobiographical essay "Growing Up Asian in America" (1989:246). Noda questioned this seeming capitulation on the part of her parents: "Why did you go into those camps, I raged at my parents, frightened by my own inner silence and timidity. Why didn't you do anything to resist?" But Noda (1989) later discovers a compelling explanation as to why Asian Americans are so often portrayed as conforming: "I had not been able to imagine before what it must have felt like to be an American—to know absolutely that one is an American—and yet to have almost everyone else deny it. Not only deny it, but challenge that identity with machine guns and troops of white American soldiers. In those circumstances it was difficult to say, 'I'm a Japanese American.' 'American' had to do" (p. 247).

Native American women can draw upon a tradition of motherhood and woman's power inherent in Native American cultures (Allen 1986; Awiakta 1988). In such philosophies, "water, land, and life are basic to the natural order," says Winona LaDuke (1988). "All else has been created by the use and misuse of technology. It is only natural that in our respective struggles for survival, the native peoples are waging a war to protect the land, the water, and life, while the consumer culture strives to protect its technological lifeblood" (p. 65). Marilou Awiakta (1988) offers a powerful summary of the symbolic meaning of motherhood in Native American cultures: "I feel the Grandmother's power. She sings of harmony, not dominance. And her

song rises from a culture that repeats the wise balance of nature. The gender capable of bearing life is not separated from the power to sustain it" (p. 126). A culture that sees the connectedness between the earth and human survival, and that sees motherhood as symbolic of the earth itself holds motherhood as an institution in high regard.

## Concluding Remarks

Survival, power, and identity shape motherhood for all women. But these themes remain muted when the mothering experiences of women of color are marginalized in feminist theorizing about motherhood. The theories reflect a lack of attention to the connection between ideas and the contexts in which they emerge. Although such decontextualization aims to generate universal theories of human behavior, in actuality the theories routinely distort or omit huge categories of human experience.

Placing racial ethnic women's motherwork in the center of analysis recontextualizes motherhood. Whereas the significance of race and class in shaping the context in which motherhood occurs is virtually invisible when white, middle-class women's experiences are the theoretical norm, the effects of race and class stand out in stark relief when women of color are accorded theoretical primacy. Highlighting racial ethnic mothers' struggles concerning their children's right to exist focuses attention on the importance of survival. Exploring the dialectical nature of racial ethnic women's empowerment in structures of racial domination and economic exploitation demonstrates the need to broaden the definition of maternal power. Emphasizing how the quest for self-definition is mediated by membership in different racial and social class groups reveals how the issue of identity is crucial to all motherwork.

Existing feminist theories of motherhood have emerged in specific intellectual and political contexts. By assuming that social theory will be applicable regardless of social context, feminist scholars fail to realize that they themselves are rooted in specific locations, and that the contexts in which they are located provide the thought-models of how they interpret the world. Their theories may appear to be universal and objective, but they actually are only partial perspectives reflecting the white middle-class context in which their creators live. Large segments of experience, those of women who are not white and middle class, have been excluded (Spelman 1988). Feminist theories of motherhood thus cannot be seen as theories of motherhood generalizable to all women. The resulting patterns of partiality inherent in existing theories—for example, the emphasis placed on all-powerful mothers as conduits for gender oppression—reflect feminist theorists' positions in structures of power. Such theorists are themselves participants in a system of privilege that rewards them for not seeing race and class privilege as important. Their theories can ignore the workings of class and race as systems of privilege because their creators often benefit from that privilege, taking it as a given and not as something to be contested.

Theorizing about motherhood will not be helped, however, by supplanting one group's theory with that of another—for example, by claiming that women of color's experiences are more valid than those of white middle-class women. Just as varying placement in systems of privilege, whether race, class, sexuality, or age, generates divergent experiences with motherhood, examining motherhood and mother-as-subject from multiple perspectives should uncover rich textures of difference. Shifting the center to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us toward feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality.

## ENDNOTES

1. In this chapter, I use the terms *racial ethnic women* and *women of color* interchangeably. Grounded in the experiences of groups who have been the targets of racism, the term *racial ethnic* implies more solidarity with men involved in struggles against racism. In contrast, the term *women of color* emerges from a feminist background where racial ethnic women committed to feminist struggle aimed to distinguish their history and issues from those of middle-class white women. Neither term captures the complexity of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Hispanic women's experiences.
2. Positivist social science exemplifies this type of decontextualization. In order to create scientific descriptions of reality, positivist researchers aim to produce ostensibly objective generalizations. But because researchers have widely differing values, experiences, and emotions, genuine science is thought to be unattainable unless all human characteristics except rationality are eliminated from the research process. By following strict methodological rules, scientists aimed to distance themselves from the values, vested interests, and emotions generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation. By decontextualizing themselves, they allegedly become detached observers and manipulators of nature. Moreover, this researcher decontextualization is paralleled by comparable efforts to remove the objects of study from their contexts (Jaggar 1983).
3. Dominant theories are characterized by this decontextualization. Boyd's (1989) helpful survey of literature on the mother-daughter relationship reveals that though much work has been done on motherhood generally, and on the mother-daughter relationship, very little of it tests feminist theories of motherhood. Boyd identifies two prevailing theories—psychoanalytic theory and social learning theory—that she claims form the bulk of feminist theorizing. Both of these approaches minimize the importance of race and class in the context of motherhood. Boyd ignores Marxist-feminist theorizing about motherhood, mainly because very little of this work is concerned with the mother-daughter relationship. But Marxist-feminist analyses of motherhood provide another example of how decontextualization frames feminist theories of motherhood. See, e.g., Ann Ferguson's *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Male Dominance* (1989), an ambitious attempt to develop a universal theory of motherhood that is linked to the social construction of sexuality and male dominance. Ferguson's work stems from a feminist tradition that explores the relation between motherhood and sexuality by either bemoaning their putative incompatibility or romanticizing maternal sexuality.
4. Psychoanalytic feminist theorizing about motherhood, such as Nancy Chodorow's groundbreaking work *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), exemplifies how decontextualization of race and/or class can weaken what is otherwise

strong feminist theorizing. Although I realize that other feminist approaches to motherhood exist—see, e.g., Eisenstein's (1983) summary—I have chosen to stress psychoanalytic feminist theory because the work of Chodorow and others has been highly influential in framing the predominant themes in feminist discourse.

5. The thesis of the atomized individual that underlies Western psychology is rooted in a much larger Western construction concerning the relation of the individual to the community (Hartsock 1983). Theories of motherhood based on the assumption of the atomized human proceed to use this definition of the individual as the unit of analysis and then construct theory from this base. From this grow assumptions that the major process to examine is that between freely choosing rational individuals engaging in bargains (Hartsock 1983).
6. The narrative tradition in the writings of women of color addresses this effort to recover the history of mothers. Works from African American women's autobiographical tradition such as Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Marita Golden's *The Heart of a Woman* contain the authentic voices of African American women centered on experiences of motherhood. Works from African American women's fiction include *This Child's Gonna Live*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*. Asian American women's fiction, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Maxine Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, and autobiographies, such as Jean Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, offer a parallel source of authentic voice. Connie Young Yu (1989) entitles her article on the history of Asian American women "The World of Our Grandmothers" and recreates Asian American history with her grandmother as a central figure. Cherríe Moraga (1979) writes a letter to her mother as a way of coming to terms with the contradictions in her racial identity as a Chicana. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) weaves autobiography, poetry, and philosophy together in her exploration of women and mothering.
7. Notable examples include Lutie Johnson's unsuccessful attempt to rescue her son from the harmful effects of an urban environment in Ann Petry's *The Street*; and Meridian's work on behalf of the children of a small southern town after she chooses to relinquish her own child, in Alice Walker's *Meridian*.
8. Noticeably absent from feminist theories of motherhood is a comprehensive theory of power and an account of how power relations shape any theories actually developed. Firmly rooted in an exchange-based marketplace with its accompanying assumptions of rational economic decision making and white male control of the marketplace, this model of community stresses the rights of individuals, including feminist theorists, to make decisions in their own interest, regardless of the impact on larger society. Composed of a collection of unequal individuals who compete for greater shares of money as the medium of exchange, this model of community legitimates relations of domination either by denying they exist or by treating them as inevitable but unimportant (Hartsock 1983).

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## 23

## TEENAGE MOTHERING ON THE NAVAJO RESERVATION

## An Examination of Intergenerational Perceptions and Beliefs

ROCHELLE L. DALLA • WENDY C. GAMBLE

Teenage parenting, characterized as a "crisis" by some<sup>1</sup> and an "alternative life course strategy" by others,<sup>2</sup> comprises an issue of debate and concern among policy makers, academicians, educators, and social-service providers alike. Not surprisingly, teenage parenting has received considerable attention from behavioral scientists over the past three decades. Still, significant gaps exist in the current literature.

The majority of investigations have included Euro-American populations as the reference group, with secondary attention focused on Blacks and non-White Hispanics. Little attention has been afforded Navajo (and other Native American) teenage mothers. The individuals participating in the present study reside on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. The Navajo Nation is the largest tribe in North America,<sup>3</sup> occupies the most expansive reservation,<sup>4</sup> and experiences higher rates of teenage childbirth among youth aged fifteen to nineteen than among similarly aged women across the

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