AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS AS CURRICULA AND TEACHERS:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose of Study

Recognizing that people of African descent have been victims of slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism and that [2]we continue to be victims of the consequences of these atrocities, the United Nations (UN) has declared this present decade, 2015-2024, The International Decade for People of African Descent. According to the UN:

> There are around 200 million people identifying themselves as being of African descent live in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent.
>
> Whether as descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade or as more recent migrants, they constitute some of the poorest and most marginalized groups. Studies and findings by international and national bodies demonstrate that people of African descent still have limited access to quality education, health services, housing and social security. (United Nations, n.d., para. 1-2)

The UN's dedication of this decade officially marks its attempts to "propose concrete measures to promote their full inclusion and to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance" (United Nations, n.d., para. 10). My study is situated within this context. Simply stated, this project is an examination of the lives of three women of African

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[1] I use the term African American, instead of Black, to describe the participants in the study to be consistent with current scholarship. I also use the identifier to give a U.S. context to this study. Both African American and Black are found in the literature that undergirds this study; as a result, both terms are appear in my dissertation. I capitalize Black when it refers to race/ethnicity. Some scholars do not.

[2] As an African American woman, I use the first-person plural pronoun "we" and "us" instead of "they" and "them" when referring groups of which I am a part, e.g., people of African descent, African Americans, and African American women. Since I am not a mother, I do not use first-person plural pronouns when referring to African American mothers.

descent in the United States of America with recognition of the shared oppression of women in the African diaspora. A requisite component of this investigation is an analysis of the historical forces, such as the slave trade and its aftermath, that have shaped U.S. Black women's lives. By situating the participants' lives in this historical context and by placing my findings in conversation with extant literature, I am able to produce new knowledge that illuminates the lived experiences of African American single mothers. Knowledge produced by oppressed groups, like Black women, is intentionally suppressed: "Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequalities" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 3). The purpose of this study, then, is to create a space that encourages the marginalized and often unheard voices of African American single mothers experiencing poverty by inviting them to teach those outside their world about their living conditions and their position in the United States social hierarchy.

The participants are three single (unmarried) African American mothers who draw upon government assistance for financial support. Faith is a 49 year-old African American single mother of four. She has been married and divorced once and her ex-husband is the father of all four children. Jackie is a 33 year-old African American mother of four. She has been married and divorced twice and has two children from each marriage. Taneya is a 36 year-old Indian/African American mother of seven. She is pregnant with her eighth child and has never been married. (Appendix C reflects this demographic data.) They all live in the Southern United States, a region where, according to 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, 30.8% of residents live in poverty, compared to 25.7% nationally (Bishaw, 2014).

A specific form of narrative inquiry, life history research, is the methodology employed to discover answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do the self-defined lives of three African American single mothers experiencing poverty reflect and/or contradict two commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes about poor African American mothers?
    - What are their living conditions?
    - What lifestyles are they afforded?
    - What are their everyday experiences?
    - In what ways do they embody motherhood?
2. How do three African American single mothers in poverty perceive themselves?
    - From their perspectives, where do they stand in the present day in relation to privilege, power, vulnerability, and oppression?
    - In what ways do they think the position of impoverished African American women has changed over the last fifty years?

Black Women as Mules.

In her classic African American novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston used a symbol for Black women that is apropos to this study. Hurston fictively explored the position and conditions of the mostly poor Black American woman, Janie. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, aptly appraised:

> So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his

> womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," (Hurston, 1937, p. 19-20).

Interestingly, she seemed to recognize the universal nature of the existence of Black women in "de world"—not just in the United States, making us members of a sisterhood of subjugated women. Mules are valued mostly for their capacity to perform strenuous, mundane work—precisely for carrying the loads of others. African American poet Langston Hughes described the Black woman who works as a domestic in similar terms, "I said, Madam,/Can it be/You trying to make a/Pack-horse out of me?" If Hurston's "mule" and Hughes' "pack-horse" are accurate descriptions of the Black woman's status and living conditions, then it is time to learn more about this overburdened woman—her world (living conditions) and her place in the world (social position). What loads does she carry, how, and why? Unlike the mule, however, the Black women in this study narrate stories of their lived experiences. They use their voices to illuminate what Nanny and Madam described as their beast-like condition and position.

Self-Defined Living Conditions.

Primarily, my study is designed, in part, to answer a question that juxtaposes self-defined realities with externally imposed representations: To what extent do the living conditions of African American single mothers experiencing poverty reflect and/or contradict two commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes about poor African American women, specifically the *welfare queen* and the *matriarch* stereotypes? The most common stereotype of the impoverished African American single mother is the welfare queen; she is characterized by an opulent lifestyle financed by the government. She is believed to capitalize on her poverty in unscrupulous ways (Blake, 2012). In describing a phenomenon they call "welfare racism," Neubeck and Cazenave (2001) claimed, "In recent decades, in the mass media, and in everyday conversation, mothers

and children who rely on welfare in the United States have overwhelmingly and erroneously been depicted as 'black'" (p.3). African American women from various backgrounds have found themselves stereotyped as so-called welfare queens and stigmatized with the negative qualities that accompany the label (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). These stereotypes have the potential to not only shape public perception but also to influence legislation regarding government benefits. For example, in February 2015, Missouri State Rep. Rick Brattin proposed legislation that would ban food stamps recipients from using their Electronic Benefit Transfer-EBT (food stamps) cards to buy steak and seafood, seeing these as luxury items (Wing & Delaney, 2015). Holley and Izadi (2015) profiled similar restrictions signed into law by Kansas lawmakers. House Bill 2258, approved by Kansas' governor on April 16, 2015, does not allow welfare recipients to spend their benefits at theme parks or to withdraw more than $25 per day (Holley & Izadi, 2015). In a widely shared article published the same month, I cited five reasons why these public policies are harmful and ineffective:

1. These "use-only-for" limitations impose barriers that might deter those who need these benefits from utilizing them, which means that many women and children may lack their basic needs.
2. These "use-only-for" limitations seem punitive in nature. They punish families for needing government assistance by restricting their purchasing freedom. Provision shouldn't feel like punishment.
3. These "use-only-for" limitations add to the shame that many welfare and food stamp recipients already feel. Imagine being in the grocery store feeling anxious about your food selections because you know you're being monitored. Imagine the embarrassment of having your basic purchases denied because they are not allowed.

4. These “use-only-for” limitations make powerful statements about who deserves luxury food items (steak and seafood). In essence, these lawmakers are saying, “You’re not good enough for/to . . .”

5. These “use-only-for” limitations detract from the overarching issues about race, class, and gender inequities that cause some groups, mainly low-income women of color, who disproportionately receive government benefits. Melissa Harris-Perry wrote in *Sister Citizen*, “Issues of race, gender, and class inequality that affect black women’s lives in America point to problems embedded in the fabric of the nation.” Attempts to reform discriminatory institutions through restrictions like the ones lawmakers in Missouri and Kansas are proposing are like using spit to put out a forest fire. (Gaston, 2015, para. 9)

Both laws imply that welfare and food stamp recipients have excess resources to spend wastefully in their attempts to live extravagant lives, when they should experience a mediocre standard of living at best. They and their children eat sumptuously and undeservedly so. Their irresponsibility require governmental oversight. But what are their living conditions? What lifestyles are they afforded? What are their everyday experiences? In what ways do they embody motherhood?

Due to their unmarried status, single African American mothers, who are likely to be heads of households, are subject to another stereotypical image—the Black matriarch. In the most innocuous characterizations, she is represented as 1) emasculating the Black male and regarding him as irresponsible, 2) adhering to strong religious values, 3) valuing mothering as her most important role, and 4) striving to protect her children from and prepare them for the prejudices of a white world (Anderson, 1976). In the most harmful depictions, she is construed

as gender deviant. When applied to White women, "matriarch" is seen as a positive label; whereas when it assigned to Black women, the matriarch is seen as hypofeminine, an image that "emphasizes domination, aggression, strength, and toughness as well as minimizes nurturing and caring" (Donovan, 2011, p. 460). In her study examining whether stereotypic depictions of Black and White women were consistent with those discussed in theoretical and/or empirical literature, Donovan (2011) found that Black women were rated significantly higher on the matriarch construct, suggesting that they are more likely to be ascribed this stereotype. Black women, then, encounter gender oppression[3] overlapped with racial oppression, resulting in stereotypes that are unique to Black women. Both stereotypical images—the welfare queen and the matriarch—are examined more closely in Chapter 2.

Self-Perceived Social Position.

Studying the conditions of poor African American women is not only instructive for dispelling stereotypes; it also supports a second, related query that explores their self-perceptions of their social position. Robinson, in her 1968 article "Poor black women," recognized the need to address the position of poor Black women in the United States, to gather and analyze their perspectives, to learn from what they share (Robinson, 2002). In the article, Robinson revealed the participants' (poor Black women) collective perspective on the United States' social class hierarchy, power, capitalism, and oppression, ultimately revealing the women's desire for equality—racial, class, and gender justice. In 2016, on the eve of a presidential election in which economic disparities are a central concern for many Americans, it is still "time to speak to the whole question of the position of poor black women." (p. 68)

[3] "Oppression describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 4).

Robinson (2002) argued that the Black woman had failed to interrogate the social and economic system; they, instead, blamed the Black man for the Black woman's oppression. My study gives African American women the opportunity to question how their social position is impacted by existing social, economic, and political systems. Their position at the intersection of racist and sexist ideology is described by the narrator in Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison's (1970) first novel:

> Edging in life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a *position* to give them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' 'White men said,' 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they did not take orders from were black children and each other. (emphasis added, p.109)

Through this description, Black women are seen as controlled and commanded, holding a position unequal to men and to White women. Instead of unapologetically arriving at life through the façade, we edge in the only place we are allowed—through the back door.

I describe these women's position as being within the margins of the margins. Although Black women as a single demographic unit represent a heterogeneous group of women, we, as a whole, are often disenfranchised because of our race and our gender in a society that has historically privileged Whiteness and maleness. There is "a shared recognition that the interlocking system race/ethnicity and gender intersect with class oppression to simultaneously shape the experience of all Black women" (Dickerson, 1995, p. xix). Our minoritized status renders us a position away from the mainstream, away from the center. This marginalized status is even more true for certain sub-populations within Black women, namely for African American single mothers who experience poverty. Augustin (1997) maintained that Black mothers are "a fungible group of outcasts" (p. 145). They are described as living in a *social outback* where the

terms of survival are very different from those most Americans know (Dodson, 1999). Further, Black women in poverty live "outside the society" of individuals who make decisions and laws, allocate resources, write histories, and plan for the future (Omolade, 1994, p. 38).

Similarly, Hill Collins (1990) described black women as necessary "others" who, by being marginalized, define where the boundaries are, and who, by not belonging, emphasize the importance of belonging (p. 68). This study reveals nuanced details about their position in the margins of the margins. In what ways are they in positions of power? How are they oppressed? What are privileges from which they are denied? What are their vulnerabilities?

Summary.

Summarily, this project has two closely related foci: the often misconstrued and stereotyped conditions and the precarious position of African American women experiencing poverty. The study's parameters are defined by the two overarching research questions and six more pointed subquestions. "Condition" is defined as a way of everyday living or a standard of living, while "position" refers to hierarchical location as related to other groups. The voices of impoverished Black women are of major importance to this investigation. Their lives are centered in ways that allow for distinctive descriptions that illuminate their conditions and their self-perceptions of their social position.

Theoretical Background

Black Feminism.

Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 1986, 1990, & 2000) is the major theoretical and philosophical ground on which this study stands. The core objective of Black feminist thought is clarifying Black women's experiences and ideas (Hill Collins, 2000). Mirza (1986) explained the significance of Black feminism as a theoretical framework: "Our experience as black women

has led us to develop a new and radical theoretical perspective with as much academic credibility as any other theoretical school" (p. 103). The workings of this framework were mainly articulated by Patricia Hill Collins. Hill Collins (1990) summarized the goal of Black feminist thought, a critical social theory: to resist oppression sustained by intersecting oppressions. Two aspects of Black feminist thought that are particularly relevant to this study are 1) refuting controlling images of Black women and 2) recognizing a Black women's collective standpoint. Hill Collins (2000) argued that due to deeply embedded negative portrayals that have led to stereotypes of Black women, "challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought" (p. 69). A 2013 Essence magazine poll[4] revealed these findings:

> In the study, more than 1,200 respondents told us that the images we encounter regularly on TV, in social media, in music videos and from other outlets are overwhelmingly negative and fall into categories that make us cringe — Gold Diggers, Modern Jezebels, Baby Mamas, Uneducated Sisters, Ratchet Women, Angry Black Women, Mean Black Girls, Unhealthy Black Women, and Black Barbies. (Walton, 2013, para. 2)

When Black feminist thought is used to analyze these controlling images, we expose the ways systems of oppression intersect (Hill Collins, 2000). Monnat (2010) described this intersection as *gendered racism*: "Individuals do not separately experience gender and race; rather, they uniquely experience the social world as gendered racialized beings" (p. 642). Black feminist thought attends to these intersections and others.

Second, a self-defined Black women's standpoint is a core theme in Black feminist thought: "Challenging controlling images and replacing them with a Black women's standpoint constituted an essential component in resisting intersecting oppressions" (Hill Collins, 2000, p.

[4] Essence is the premier lifestyle, fashion, and beauty magazine for African American women.

112). A self-defined, group-derived standpoint that has been formed as a result of a shared history of oppression has been essential to the survival of U.S. Black women (Hill Collins, 2000). Hill Collins' standpoint theory can be described as such:

> A social theory arguing that group location in hierarchical power relations produces common challenges for individuals in those groups. Moreover, shared experiences can foster similar angles of vision leading to group knowledge or standpoint deemed essential for informed political action. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 301)

With these emphases on challenging controlling images, created through harmful compounded racist and sexist ideologies, and acknowledging Black women's standpoint, this theory enabled me to better understand the lives of single Black mothers experiencing poverty. Though Hill Collins is credited for thoroughly conceiving Black feminism as a theoretical construct in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Black feminism, as a movement, paved the way for Black feminist thought.

Black feminism, as an activist movement, can be said to have gained an identity, a name, in the late 60's and early 1970's, though Black feminism can be traced to the work of activist Black women hundreds of years before this time. Contemporary US Black feminism originated with The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and the Combahee River Collective, a radical Black feminist group whose mission was to confront systems of oppression through political movement. In "A Black feminist statement," the Combahee River Collective (1982) delineated their core beliefs—beliefs that convey the spirit of Black feminism:

We believe . . .

1) Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.

2) The most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.

3) Sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race.

4) In solidarity with Black men and do not advocate fractionalization.

5) The liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic-systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.

6) In the inclusion, not separation, of lesbians.

Several of these beliefs strongly influence my approach to this study. I, too, believe in the inherent value of all Black women and our liberation. Writers of "A Black feminist statement" placed substantial emphasis on shared identity, and although I support identity politics, defined as politics that emerge from an identity, I stress the importance of acknowledging and attending to differences within the sisterhood, for our different identity markers shape how we experience the world. Additionally, I believe that patriarchy, capitalism, and racism intersect to uniquely oppress Black women (number five above). This belief strongly undergirds my study. Our current socio-economic-political is governed by neoliberal policies. Twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism emphasizes deregulation and free markets combined with capitalist exploitation of labor by the wealthy. This form of capitalism is especially harmful to Black women, many of whom are working in the lowest paying occupational categories (Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Reflected in the Black feminist statement is a non-hostile view of Black men and acceptance of same-sex relationships. Though I am focusing on Black women in this study, my approach is not guided by anti-Black men sentiment; consequently, Black men are not automatically blamed for the conditions of Black women. It is important to distinguish between exposing forms of systematic oppression such as sexism and patriarchy and attacking men as individuals. Acknowledging the presence of anti-Black man sentiment within some Black feminist circles, Smith (2000) offered, "Unfortunately, some of the widely distributed writing about Black women's issues has not made this issue sufficiently clear" (p. xxx). In this study, I am intent on addressing ideologies and systems, not groups of individuals—not Black men.

Additionally, in resistance to heteronormative assumptions about intimate relationships and in solidarity with queer Black women, my study does not exclude women (and/or their partners) who do not identify as heterosexual. Black women experiencing poverty who are also lesbian are unjustly scrutinized and judged because of their sexuality (Omolade, 1986). Their lesbian identity marker further complicates their already inferior position in the social hierarchy. The poverty rate for African American lesbian couples is 21.1%, lower than the poverty rate for African American women but significantly higher than the poverty rate for White lesbian couples, 4.3% (Guerra, 2013).

Similar to the Combahee River Collective, leading Black feminist Guy-Sheftall (1995, p. 2) listed five premises of Black feminism that are worthy of noting:

1. Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources;

2. This triple jeopardy has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men;
3. Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously;
4. There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the heterosexism;
5. Black women's commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.

Of particular interest is the fifth premise with its emphasis on lived experience. An important aspect of this study is the centrality of lived experience. Studying lived experiences, a core component of qualitative inquiry, can reveal an individual's interpretation of her reality, nuanced differences among individuals, complexities of actions, and contradictions in thinking. With its focus on self-identification and lived experience, Black feminism can be an especially useful theoretical frame for engaging in qualitative research with Black women who have been misidentified and whose experiences have not been deemed valuable.

Critical Race Feminism.

For education scholars Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), the theoretical framework that combats racial and gender oppression from multiple standpoints is critical race feminism, which is an outgrowth of critical race theory. Critical race feminism has multiple defining attributes that mirror Black feminist theory. Like Black feminist theory, critical race feminism

1. purports that women of color's experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women;
2. focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression;
3. asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist);
4. is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and
5. calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. (Evans-Winters and Esposito, 2010, p. 20)

Critical race feminism was birthed by legal scholars who were concerned with the legal status and rights of women of color. According to critical race feminism pioneer, Adrien K. Wing, "women of color are disproportionately stalled at the bottom of every society—economically, socially, and politically—no matter what country they call their own" (Wing, 2015, p. 162). Key components of critical race feminism are storytelling and counter-storytelling (narratives) and intersectionality, both of which are reflected in the methodology of this study. Perhaps more explicitly stated in critical race feminism because of its close relation to critical race theory than in Black feminism are three additional tenets: 1) interest convergence-Whites will support the rights of Blacks only when it serves their interests as well, 2) the normalization of racism-racism is a normal, permanent part of society, and 3) refusal of colorblindness-race, though a social construct, immeasurably impacts the social world, both overtly and covertly. Because both frameworks legitimize the voices of Black women, centralize the importance of analyzing Black women's oppression as a result of holding multiple socially constructed identities, and appreciate

the unique standpoint of Black women, they are most appropriate for helping to explain the challenges faced by Black women in poverty.

Marxist Implications for Black Feminism.

As is reflected in the Combahee River Collective (1982) Black feminist statement, early Black feminists were concerned not only with race and gender oppression but class oppression as well. They linked Black women's low socioeconomic status with capitalism: "We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy" (p. 17). Believing that Black women, because of their status as women, as Blacks, and as workers, were "the most oppressed stratum of the whole population" (Jones, 1995, p. 109), the Collective asserted that the liberation of Black women would equal the liberation of all oppressed peoples (Combahee River Collective, 1982). They were not alone in their belief that the U.S. capitalistic economic system disenfranchises working class Blacks and Black women particularly. Reflecting Marxist/Socialist sentiments, Lucy Parson believed that "racism and sexism were overshadowed by the capitalists' overall exploitation of the working class" and that Blacks and women needed to focus their energies on class struggle (Davis, 1983, p. 153). By using a Black Feminist theoretical framework with Marxist leanings, I gain an understanding of how capitalism influences the conditions and position of the participants.

Challenges within Black Feminism.

One of the challenges within 21st century Black feminism is to account for the experiences of not only academic and middle-class Black women, but of *all* Black women. To do so, we must examine differences within the sisterhood of Black women. According to hooks (2000), "Class difference and the way in which it divides women was an issue women in

feminist movement talked about long before race" (p. 37). Perhaps analyses that include both class and race as points of examination are overdue. In the second edition to her classic, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Hill-Collins (2000) apprised, "Despite its size and significance, the Black working class has been rendered mostly invisible within contemporary U.S. Black feminist thought" (p. 91). Similarly hooks (2000) insisted, that true feminist liberation "challenges class elitism" (p. 43). In "Crossing the great divides: Race, class, and gender in Southern women's organizing, 1979-1991," Smith (1995) asserted,

> The differential and divisive character of race, class, and gender creates extraordinary obstacles for those who would challenge oppression in all of its forms. How do we create unified movements-or at least mutually supportive organizations and activities-when the very oppressions we experience and seek to undermine also involve forms of privilege that divide us internally? More specifically, on what basis can women unite across the divides of race and class? If our life circumstances and political agendas are so varied, even conflictual, are there any strategies we can pursue in common? (pp. 680-681)

Smith's quote revealed to feminist and Black feminist scholars an area that must be addressed if we (feminists and Black feminists) are to work towards liberation for *all* women. One way to address race and class inequities within feminism and Black feminism is to include the voices of diverse women in our scholarly work. Audre Lorde, who unrelentlessly emphasized the need to acknowledge differences within Black feminism, offered the following about class differences: "Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each other's energy and creative insight" (Lorde, 1984, p. 114). Similarly, Crenshaw (1991) expressed the importance of an analysis beyond race and gender: "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend

difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (p. 1242). Forming unity among a heterogeneous group continues to be a challenge of Black Feminism: "The shared experiences of racism, sexism, and classism—difficult and ubiquitous as they are—have not been sufficient to bring us [Black women] together in movements benefiting the diasporic collective . . . . our differences have proved to be at least as significant as our similarities (Razak, 2006, p. 99). I contend, as did Thornton Dill (1983) that our differences can be sources of strength that "enrich our political and social action" (p. 41). Homogeneity impedes unity and silences those within the margins of the margins.

Significance of Study

Feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), in a speech entitled, "The Danger of the Single Story," said, "The single story creates stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." For far too long, we have been fed one-sided narratives of African American women who are poor; as a result, stereotypical depictions based on deeply entrenched racist and sexist ideologies saturate mainstream discourse (Morgan, 1997; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill-Collins, 2008). This project, then, is an attempt to deconstruct these stereotypes. A personal anecdote illustrates a belief born of the welfare queen stereotype:

On January 2, 2014, my then-boyfriend/now-husband and I went to a downtown sports bar with another couple to watch a football game and to have dinner. As I walked in the door, an older couple yelled, "Go frogs!" I realized that I was wearing my TCU jacket, so I made the horned frog sign with my fingers and replied, "Go frogs!" They beckoned me to the table, and I walked over to say hi while my party went to our table. The husband, who looked to be in his late 70s or early 80s, asked if I graduated from TCU. I replied, "I'm there now, pursuing my

doctorate in education." The wife said that she graduated from TCU in 1961. The TCU chatter was going smoothly until he made comments that I wrote in a memo as soon as I got home. These are his comments as I recalled them:

> I'm so glad you're taking advantage of your opportunities by getting an education. So many Black women don't want to do anything but have babies and collect welfare checks. They have no excuse for not making something out of their lives like you're doing. Things are different now. I own several businesses and have lots of Black people working for me, and I tell them to make something of their lives. I encourage them to go to school or open their own businesses. I just don't know what to say about all these Black women on welfare. They want hardworking people like us to take care of them. Look at you. You went to school and got an education.

I stood in front of him dumbfounded, not only by the assumptions he made *about* Black women who use government assistance, but also that he had the courage to admit these beliefs *to* a Black woman. Although he did not use these adjectives, he characterized these women as lazy, undeserving, unmotivated, and opportunistic. He ascribed to them the power to "make something of their lives." Cannon (1995) argues, "dominant ethics makes a virtue of qualities that lead to economic success—self-reliance, frugality, and industry. These qualities are based on an assumption that success is possible for anyone who tries" (p. 58). In many cases, this is not true for Black women who face the entwined giants of racial discrimination, class exploitation, and gender oppression.

An example of "racial stories," his myopic diatribe demonstrates how widely this single story of Black mothers who are poor has been injected into the consciousness of some Americans. Monnat (2010) asserted that "racial stories" are employed by Whites to justify their

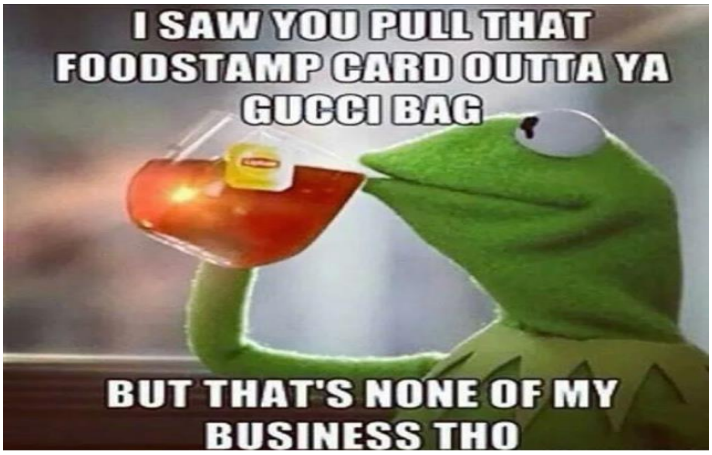
positions (p. 645). Storylines enable the American public to "place the blame for Black poverty on Black women" (Monnat, 2010, p. 647). Additionally, racial stories, like the one told to me at the sports bar, perpetuate stereotypes. Because we have been traditionally excluded from positions of power, stereotypical images of Black women "permeate popular culture and public policy" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 5). Many of these images about African American single mothers are shared through social media. A recent Pew Center Research study estimates that 65% of adults in the U.S. use social media (Perrin, 2015). Ferrara, Asbagh, Varol, Qazvinian, Menczer, and Flammini (2013, p. 1) noted that "social media has been growing at unprecedented rates during recent years." Among the many uses of platforms such as Twitter is spreading news and opinions (Ferrara et al, 2013). A popular method of disseminating news and opinions on social media is through memes. Because creators of memes rarely assume ownership with a name, tracing the origin is nearly impossible. These memes "illustrate a shocking derision for black women" (Winfrey-Harris, 2015, p. 1). Simply defined, a meme is a unit of information—an idea or a concept—that can spread from person to person through the social network (Ferrah et al, 2013, p. 1). One common form of a meme is an image combined with text. The memes included below are several that I encountered on social media. Combined, these memes tell a gendered, racialized single story: Women who use government assistance are lazy, undeserving, and unscrupulous.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.



In this meme below, recipients of the social welfare system are blamed for the U.S. budget deficit.

Figure 5.

New American way of life

submitted by John Tabb

The new American way of life...Get on board~~~

For a guy and his girlfriend with two kids, all you have to do is follow these proven steps:

1. Don't marry her!
2. Always use your mom's address to get your mail.
3. The guy buys a house.
4. The guy rents out house to his girlfriend with his two kids.
5. Section 8 will pay $900 a month for a 3 bedroom home.
6. Girlfriend signs up for Obamacare, so guy doesn't have to pay for family insurance.
7. Girlfriend gets to go to college for free being a single mother.
8. Girlfriend gets $600 a month for food stamps.
9. Girlfriend gets a free cell phone.
10. Girlfriend get free utilities.
11. Guy moves into home, but continues to use mom's address for his mail.
12. Girlfriend claims one kid and guy claims the other kid on their tax forms. Now both get to claim head of household at $1800 credit.
13. Girlfriend gets $1,800 a month disability for being "crazy" or having a "bad back" and never has to work again.

This plan is perfectly legal and is being executed now by millions of people.

A married couple with a stay-at-home mom yields $0 dollars.

An unmarried couple with stay-at-home mom nets $21,600 disability + $10,800 free housing + $6,000 free Obamacare + $6,000 free food + $4,800 free utilities + $6,000 Pell grant money to spend + $12,000 a year in college tuition free from Pell grant + $8,800 tax benefit for being a single mother = $75,000 a year in benefits!

Any idea why the country is $18 trillion plus in debt and half the population is sitting around letting the other half pay their way?

Maybe this is a good reason to clean house in Washington in 2016!

The aforementioned sports bar encounter planted the seeds of interest in the query at hand. This study is important because it broadens the narrative about Black single mothers who experience poverty—continuing the important, yet limited, scholarly work on this subject. The women are regarded as voiced participants, not silenced objects.

To be clear, this is not a study of the Black family; it is a study of the individual—the Black woman experiencing poverty. Ultimately, this project is about encouraging the impoverished Black woman, who is also a mother, to "name her own reality" instead of having it named for her (Omolade, 1986, p. 9). In a focus group study in which Black women discussed myths and facts about Black women, a participant responded, "'Other people misunderstand us. They judge us . . . they don't understand that we go through so many different issues and trials. They don't get what makes us up into being a complex creature. We're misunderstood'" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 96). This project is an attempt to better understand. In her book on life history, the methodology used in this study, Becker (2008) explained,

> To understand why someone behaves as he[she] does you must understand how it looked to him[her], what he[she] thought he[she] had to contend with, what alternatives he[she] saw open to him[her]; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actor's point of view. (p. 4)

The "actors" in this project are three African-American single mothers experiencing poverty. Let them teach us about their lives—their living conditions and the position to which they have been relegated. Petry's protagonist Lutie, a Black single mother in *The Street*, explained the result of people looking from an outside:

> And she decided that it all depended on where you sat how these things looked. If you looked at them from inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then you didn't really see what any Negro looked like. You couldn't because the Negro was never an individual. (1946, p. 199)

Instead of looking from "the framework of a fat weekly salary," this project endeavors to sit outsiders precisely at the center of participants' lives to examine the ways their conditions and position have been (and continue to be) influenced by a myriad of oppressive forces.

Relevance to Curriculum Studies

In the most traditional sense, Curriculum Studies is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to address longstanding education-related questions:

1. What do schools teach?
2. What should they teach?
3. Who should decide? (Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p. 1)

Phrased differently, these questions pose central epistemological queries:

1. What is knowledge?
2. What knowledge is of most worth?
3. Who should decide?

Even though these questions help to define the parameters of the field, Curriculum Studies is a somewhat amorphous discipline. Flinders and Thornton (2013) explained its fluid nature: "Its wide reach overlaps with every subject area; with cultural, political, and economic trends; with philosophical concerns; and with social issues" (p. 1). They also clarified that Curriculum Studies issues "extend well beyond schooling to include the concerns of anyone interested in how people come to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values they do" (Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. xii). It is this space of "well beyond" in which my study is situated. In the process of understanding the participants' lives, I uncover the knowledge, skills, and values they possess.

This project, with its social justice leanings, fits into the reconceptualist paradigm in Curriculum Studies: "Reconceptualists . . . . tend to see research as an inescapably political as well as intellectual act. As such it works to suppress, or to liberate, not only those who conduct the research, and those upon whom it is conducted, but as well those outside the academic subculture" (Pinar, 2004, p. 153). The political nature of my study is evident in its attempt to bring the voices of the participants from the margins to the center for a variety of audiences.

This broad nature of Curriculum Studies may be attributed to what Pacheco (2012) described as a shift from "a procedural field to a theoretically sophisticated one devoted to understanding" (p. 6). In this reconceptualist approach to Curriculum Studies, scholars seek to understand how curriculum is culturally, politically, and economically situated. The emphasis on "understanding" suggests that curriculum is an unfixed, or unfinished, entity. Parts of my

present study, then, can be found in this space of understanding curriculum, with the acknowledgement I take some liberties with the word, *curriculum.*

The relevance of my study to Curriculum Studies is found in my answers to Schubert's (2009) questions: "What is worthwhile? What is worth knowing, experiencing, needing, doing, being, becoming, overcoming, sharing, and contributing?" (p.176) I contend that knowledge about the lives of impoverished Black women is worthwhile. Not only is what we know important, so is how we know it. Due to their marginalized, objectified status, much of what we have come to know about Black women who are economically poor are narrow, stereotypical depictions based on masculinist, European knowledge. Rooted in Black feminist epistemology and Afrocentric feminist epistemology, I recognize the importance of the Black woman's social locations, the need to center Black women's lives, and the significance of experiential knowledge.

Madeleine Grumet (1981) wrote, "The problem of studying the curriculum is that we are the curriculum" (p. 122). In other words, we are the knowledge that we seek to understand. In my study, the curriculum is the African American single mother experiencing poverty. Not only is she the curriculum, she is also the teacher, as is reflected in the study's title. This study, then, allows for the production of subjugated knowledge. I contend that the general American public has been miseducated about African American single mothers who use government assistance. Social work practitioner Prince (1999) offered similar sentiments about her formal training as a social worker: "Unfortunately, the inadequacy of our education leaves us sorely lacking in knowledge at the intersection between racism and sexism which come together to disempower and scapegoat Black women" (p. 107). Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Curriculum Studies, my project has implications to multiple fields of study: education, cultural studies,

feminist studies, and sociology, among others. This study positions African American single mothers in poverty as both teachers and curricula to evidence ways racism, sexism, and classism intersect in their lives.

Chapter Two: Contextualization

Dubois argued that to understand Blacks in America, one must assess the influence of historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces (Hill, 1998). This examination of surrounding forces, or context, is integral to life history research. Dhunpath (2000) listed "context" as one of five necessary components of biographic research such as life history: "In a narrative discourse, therefore, events are always presented in their context . . . . the physical, institutional environment as well as the social, cultural, and interpersonal environment" (p. 546). Similarly, Flynn (2015) stressed the importance of this context:

> Any analysis . . . . has to take into account how socio-historical factors, such as slavery, colonialism, and post-colonialism, shape the black family as an institution and, by extension, the conditions under which mothering is lived, experienced, and practiced. (p. 370)

As a result of the need to account for context, this chapter seeks to attend to this interaction of multiple influences and forces with the goal of situating Black motherhood firmly within the historical, political, social, and economic climate. Each subtopic in this section is included to help explore the ways specific oppressive forces have influenced the making of the conditions and position of the Black woman in the U.S.

- Colonial Construction of the Black Woman
- Black Womanhood and Motherhood under Slavery
- Stereotypes and Myths of Black Womanhood and Motherhood: An Overview
- The Matriarch
- The Welfare Queen
- Black Women and U.S. Political Economy
- Black Single Motherhood

- Contemporary U.S. Black Women: A Snapshot

Colonial Construction of the Black Woman

Black women, historically, have been the objects of damaging myths and stereotypes and have suffered cruel and inhumane treatment (The Combahee River Collective, 1982). Such myths and stereotypes are the result of destructive ideologies that can be traced to European travel writings during the 16th-18th centuries. Morgan alleged, the writings of ". . . male travelers to Africa and the Americas contributed to a European discourse on black womanhood" (1997, p. 168). Though the richness and complexity of Morgan's article refuse summation, the following points can be extracted:

1. White, male travel writers frequently depicted native women in grotesque and extreme descriptions that led to these women being viewed as strange others.
2. White, male travel writers created gendered racial discourse that led to monstrous images of black women's bodies, bodies that could serve a utilitarian purpose—to produce both crops and laborers.
3. White male travel writers' discursive groundwork paved the way for the justification of European exploitation and exportation of African labor.
4. White, male travel writers sexualized the black female body and attributed to it superhuman capacity for childbearing.
5. White, male travel writers characterized native women as barbaric and savage because of social practices that differed from European's. (Morgan, 1997)

Morgan explained that dominant groups shape ideology and discourse, in this case, through travel accounts to Africa and the Americas. Mullings (1997) explanation is useful in understanding the workings of dominant ideologies:

> Dominant ideologies often justify, support, and rationalize the interests of those in power: They tell a story about why things are the way they are, setting out a framework through which hierarchy is explained and mediating contradictions between classes and between beliefs and experiences. (p. 110)

The colonizing practice of European men speaking for and about women of color became of pattern that attempted to render women of color silent. The stories told by colonizers led readers of these narratives to believe in the "natural" inferiority of the black woman, a woman who was dissimilar to the European woman and therefore not worthy of the title *woman*. These narratives, filled with images that were widely reproduced and disseminated, convinced readers that the only fitting life for the Africans they encountered was a life of servitude. According to Morgan,

> Confronted with an African they needed to exploit, European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women's breasts become evidence of tangible barbarism. African women's 'unwomanly' behavior evoked an immutable distance between Europe and Africa on which the development of racial slavery depended. (1997, p. 191)

The reports of a relatively small number of "explorers" laid the foundation for damaging ideology that led to the objectification and subjugation of black women. This belief system justified for colonizers the dehumanizing practice of United States slavery. Slavery is the primary context under which anti-black woman stereotypes in America would be most strongly shaped (hooks, 1981).

Black Womanhood and Motherhood under Slavery

Black womanhood in the U.S. was molded under the most horrendous conditions imaginable—slavery. Womanhood was defined by women's work. In *Women, Race, & Class*, Davis (1983) contended that compulsory labor is an ideal place to start an exploration of Black women's lives under slavery. Though Aunt Jemima and the Black Mammy are common images used to symbolize the compulsory labor of slave women, most were field workers, not household, or domestic, workers (Davis, 1983). Davis noted, "Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex" (1983, p. 6). Women were genderless in this sense, but their womanly capacity, specifically their fertility, was valued when they could turn economic profit for their owners: "Black women came to be increasingly appraised for their fertility (or for the lack of it): she who was potentially the mother of ten, twelve, fourteen, or more became a coveted treasure indeed" (Davis, 1983, p. 7). Slave women were not afforded the "ideological exaltation of motherhood" bestowed upon European but were considered nothing more than breeders "guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force" (Davis, 1983, p. 7). In *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts (1999) listed several "advantages" to black women reproducing during slavery:

> 1) They were sometimes guaranteed their freedom if they bore a large number of children;
>
> 2) They were less likely to be sold to another owner, which reduced the chances that they would be separated from their families;
>
> 3) They would not suffer the retribution inflicted upon barren slave women who were viewed as a loss of investment.

Though Roberts (1990) indicated that slave women were sometimes rewarded for pregnancy with relief from work in the field, Davis (1983, p. 9) noted that even while pregnant, slave women performed the same field labor and received the same punishments as men. (This seeming discrepancy can likely be reconciled by recognizing differing practices among slave owners.) Because female slaves demonstrated that they could perform the same "manly" jobs as male slaves, in addition to executing "womanly" tasks, White slave owners ascribed to them the racialized and sexualized characterization of being "masculinized, sub-human creatures" (hooks, 1981, p. 71). This depiction, instead of promoting equality between the sexes, would lead to the formation of the black matriarchy theory (hooks, 1981).

Perhaps the most defining cruelty to which slave women were subjected was rape and impregnation by their owners. This sexual exploitation resulted in a devaluation of black womanhood that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years (hooks, 1981). This depreciation, according to hooks, is necessary for "the maintenance of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1981, p. 78).

> As slavery developed in the black-belt plantations, ownership of African women soon included owning their sex life also. Thus, it was common for African women who were enslaved to be sexually assaulted, raped, and made concubines. It was also common for the master (or other males in the master's family) to bring a particular slave woman to live and work in his home, in order to facilitate his sexual attacks." (Scales-Trent, 1995, p. 5)

As property themselves, black women had little to no autonomy with regard to their bodies. Their masters routinely usurped authority of the bodies of black female slaves causing them to be subjected to a form of violence and brutality not commonly experienced by Black male slaves.

Davis described this victimization: ". . . slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place. If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults . . . would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness" (1983, p. 24). Roberts echoed these thoughts, "The rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites' domination over their human property" (Robert, 1990, p. 29). This exploitation, victimization, and sexualization of Black women during and after slavery would give birth to two damaging stereotypes about Black women that would persist for generations—the mammy and the promiscuous Black woman. Two additional stereotypes, the welfare queen and the matriarch, would also be constructed post-Antebellum.

Stereotypes and Myths of Black Womanhood and Motherhood: An Overview

Although club (organization) women and other Black women leaders sought to redefine Black womanhood during the 19th century based upon morality, chastity, virtue, and education; harmful stereotypes, myths, and images of Black women pervaded population imagination (Gray White, 1999). In her thoughtful treatment of stereotypes of Black women, Hill Collins (2000) described four stereotypes of Black women that serve to maintain gender and racial oppression: 1) mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant, 2) matriarch—the bad black mother raising children in the black home, 3) the welfare mother—the black mother who depends upon the post-World War II welfare state, and 4) Jezebel—the whore or sexually aggressive black woman. Hill Collins (2000) surmised that the elite powerful groups in the U.S. manipulate ideas about Black womanhood by exploiting existing images and creating new ones. She contended, "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life." In other words,

these stereotypical images serve to disguise oppressive institutional structures that disenfranchise Black women (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 69).

In a similar manner, Harris-Perry (2011) conducted a focus group in which she convened a diverse group of Black women and asked them to write stereotypes or myths that people hold about them. Harris-Perry (2011) contended that they arrived at the same three stereotypes identified by researchers of African-American women: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Interestingly, Harris-Perry found that the focus group, themselves African-American women, included the welfare queen as a true-to-life characterization. Most believed that "the stereotype was damaging even if it was rooted in real behaviors" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 34). In Harris-Perry's analysis, the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes were identical in nature as the ones described by Hill Collins. Harris-Perry historicized these stereotypes: Jezebel was rooted in slavery: "The idea that black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 55). Harris-Perry warned that these stereotypes are damaging because they impact Black women's self-image. Davis found that not only does the Jezebel stereotype affect self-image, it also influences decision-making. In "Effects of Black Sexual Stereotypes on Sexual Decision Making among African American Women," Davis (2013) concluded that the imposed Jezebel stereotype has been internalized by many African-American women and heavily influences their sexual decision-making. While Jezebel was birthed in slavery, the myth of the Mammy was imagined post-slavery, according to Harris-Perry, who indicated, "A seductive, exotic wench [Jezebel] would threaten the stability of white families, but an asexual, omnicompetent, devoted servant was ideal" (2011, p. 71). Though Hill Collins did not name the supposed loud, outspoken matriarch stereotype, Harris-Perry called her Sapphire (from the 1930's *Amos 'n'*

Andy radio show on which the Sapphire character was nagging and assertive), "the bad black woman, the black 'bitch,' and the emasculating matriarch" (2011, p. 88). Donovan (2011) stated that the Sapphire and the matriarch images share many traits and are therefore difficult to disentangle.

Mullings (1997) elucidation of stereotypes of African American women revealed several important points. 1) An analysis of these stereotypes must consider African American women's relationship to work for her status as worker is a point of departure from dominant ideology about a woman's place. This role as a worker both mobilizes and stigmatizes us. 2) Different stereotypes are evoked in different historical moments. For example, the mammy who was a nurturing servant stereotype morphed into the matriarch who was an emasculating head of household. 3) Stereotypes about women are mediated by race and class, rendering impoverished African American women subject to characterizations unique to this population.

In their study of the ways stereotypes hinder Black women in the workplace, Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) contended that stereotypical images that negatively portray Black women may distort the way we are perceived in the workplace. They described Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, Crazy Black Bitch and Superwoman as images that help maintain white supremacy in the workplace. Even the most well-known Black woman in the world is not immune to these controlling images. Harris-Perry surmised that the angry Sapphire and hypersexualized Jezebel are the stereotypes most assigned to First Lady Michelle Obama. Mrs. Obama was framed as an angry black woman during her husband's campaign (Harris-Perry, 2011). Citing a sexualized Fox news reference to Mrs. Obama as "Barack's baby mama," Harris-Perry explained that a baby mama is a derogatory term used to describe the mother of children born out of wedlock. In her consideration of First Lady Michelle Obama, Griffin

observed, “She occupies a thoroughly new role for black women and thus walks a very fine line; she must exercise discretion lest she express too firm an opinion or appear too confident” (2011, p. 141). Otherwise, she risks confirming the labels to which she is ascribed.

As the mischaracterizations of Mrs. Obama confirm, “The more that Americans are exposed to stereotypes about black women . . . . the more these stereotypes are subconsciously triggered where real black women are concerned” (Winfrey Harris, 2015, p. 8). The two stereotypical images most germane to this investigation—the matriarch and the welfare queen—are both discussed at length below.

The Matriarch

> *“In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and, in consequence, on great many negro women as well.” (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965, p.29)*

The passage referenced in the epigraph is from a notorious federal government report produced during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor during President John Kennedy’s and President Lyndon Johnson’s administration, and sponsored by the Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor. In this 1965 publication, Moynihan examined the Negro family and pinpointed what, rather whom, he perceived to be the root of Negro poverty and its subsequent drain on the socio-political economy —the Negro mother. Despite his efforts to be racially sensitive, the report received a storm of protest (Giddings, 1984).

In *The Moynihan Report*, Moynihan described the Negro family as disorganized, disadvantaged, illegitimate, unstable, deviant, and broken. In sum, he accused the Black

matriarchal mother of causing a breakdown in black families that led to poverty, crime, alienation, under-education. This domineering matriarch usurped authority from her husband, causing him to feel emasculated and to leave the home (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). He described this condition as a "tangle of pathology" (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965, p. 30). Moynihan claimed that America has produced "a recognizable family system," but Black families have failed to conform to this system. Giddings (1984) claimed that Moynihan's report failed to "concentrate on the external machinery of racism and discrimination" (p. 325). This rhetoric continues to resurface decade after decade, even among Black conservatives such as presidential hopeful Dr. Ben Carson who echoed the "pathology" sentiments during an October 2015 SiriusXM radio interview:

> We need to face the fact that when young girls have babies out of wedlock, most of the time their education ends with that first baby. And those babies are four times as likely to grow up in poverty, end up in the penal system or the welfare system. You know, I'm not making this stuff up. That's well-documented. That's a problem. (Martosko, 2015)

Many Black scholars argued that the "problem" is that Moynihan, Carson, and others hold a singular view of parenting and lack respect for diverse family structures, namely single, Black motherhood (e.g. Bezusko, 2013; Brewer, 1988; Hill, 1998; Morrissey, 1996). Flynn (2015), in her study of Black Canadian mothers, alleged that this assassination of Black motherhood is not unique to the United States. She declared, "Recent discussions, especially in the Canadian mainstream media, are often framed in a pathological manner, in which black mothers (primarily

of Caribbean descent) as sole support providers are vilified for supposedly raising violent children, mostly boys" (p. 371).

A 1940 study conducted by Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, included findings about Black matriarchy that influenced Moynihan's report. Frazier described Black mothers as having played a dominant role in the household, having been "schooled in self-reliance and self-sufficiency during slavery" (p. 125, 1940). Davis (1983) refuted this idea of the Black slave matriarchy arguing that a matriarch must possess power, and Black women held little power (1981). Frazier (1940) further described Negro families as being "maternal households" with "matriarchal authority" (p. 126). hooks (1981) strongly opposed this depiction: "At the very time sociologists proclaimed the existence of a matriarchal order in the black family structure, black women represented one of the largest socially and economically deprived groups in America whose status in no way resembled that of a matriarch" (p. 72). Dickenson believed that both Moynihan and Frazier confused matriarchy with *matrifocality* (1995). She defined matriarchy as referring to mother/woman dominance over males and matrifocality as mother/woman centeredness (1995). Despite the seeming attractiveness of the matriarch title, Davis (1981) strongly denied the matriarch myth: "The designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer" (p. 202). Because of the low status to which Black women have been historically assigned, they lack the power to hold this purported dominant role (Giddings, 1984). In sum, the matriarch label does not reflect the reality of African American women, nor most Caucasian women (Mullings, 1997).

The Welfare Queen

> *"In Chicago, they found a woman who holds the record. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, social security, veteran's benefits for four non-existent, deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running $150,000 a year." (Reagan, 1976)*

The woman Reagan described in this campaign speech was Linda Taylor, who was later dubbed a "welfare queen" though Reagan did not use the term. The image of the welfare queen is a Black woman; she is a representation of the undeserving poor. She first became a mother as a teenager due to her sexual irresponsibility and instead of marrying the baby's father, she began collecting welfare (Crooms, 1995). She has more children by different fathers, continuing to receive welfare—income that rewards her for being "promiscuous, single, and prolific" (Crooms, 1995, p. 620). Gilman (2014) asserted,

> The welfare queen has starred in poverty discourse since the 1970s. Her tattered throne sits at the intersection of class, race, and gender, and she is used as a rhetorical tool to blame individuals for poverty rather than to examine and reform structural aspects of our society and economy (p. 279).

From Johnson's 1964 "War on Poverty" to Reagan's 1970's characterization of the welfare queen committing welfare fraud to Clinton's 1996 welfare reform, political decisions regarding welfare (and other social services) have profoundly shaped the lives of poor black women in the United States over the last fifty years. Sparks (2003) contended that portraying African-American women as "abusers of the systems, immoral, and badly in need of discipline" makes it impossible for them to appear as "legitimate and authoritative" voices in the deliberations about welfare (p. 172). In essence, this stereotyping meant that those most affected by welfare policy were the least likely to have input in policy discussions (Sparks, 2003). In "Putting a Black Face on Welfare," Schram (2003) expounded that emphasizing the disproportionate numbers of persons of color on welfare poses the danger of denigrating it as a "black program." Yet depictions of welfare that do not account for race runs the risk of leaving racial disparities unchallenged. According to Schram (2003), "White or black, the face of welfare that we project

poses political risks" (p. 197). These "risks" play out in the form of decades of political vicissitudes in the name of welfare reform.

Although welfare enrollment has declined as a result of President Bill Clinton's 1996 reform, poverty has not been reduced (Gilman, 2014). Under Clinton's reform, welfare, formerly known as AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, changed from being open-ended to having a five-year cap on eligibility, now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Gilman, 2014). The issue of welfare benefits resurfaced in the 2012 elections with presidential candidate Mitt Romney accusing President Obama of weakening TANF restrictions. According to Gilman, both Romney and President Obama built an argument around being tough on welfare recipients, but it was Romney who conjured the welfare queen stereotype to seek an advantage with White voters (Gilman, 2014). Gilman described this stereotype:

> The welfare queen embodies two stereotypes. On the one hand, she is a cunning, rational actor seeking to maximize government largesse for her benefit by having multiple children and refusing to work. On the other hand, she is a lazy, promiscuous woman "robb[ing] the country of its moral and economic resources." She challenges gender norms by failing to conform to patriarchal notions of a proper family; she ignites racist stereotypes about minorities; and her failure to succeed in a capitalist society makes her a subject of derision. (p. 260)

In "The Value of Black Mothers' Work," Roberts (1994) argued that those who support workfare instead of welfare devalue black mothers and their children. In essence, Roberts believed that workfare advocates fail to see the benefits in poor Black mothers caring for their children, fail to see the injury in these mothers leaving their young children, and are not bothered by any disharmony in the conception of a Black working mother (Roberts, 1994). She advocated for

welfare reform that support "poor single mothers' struggle to raise their children against terrifying odds" (Roberts, 1994, p. 878). In "The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Punitive Welfare Reform," Pierson-Balik (2003) argued,

> Constructions such as the "culture of single motherhood" and the "welfare queen" operate to suggest that the sexual behavior of poor women is morally questionable and markedly different from that of nonpoor women and that this wanton reproduction is the source of modern poverty. Furthermore, their inability or unwillingness to control this behavior justifies regulatory and punitive welfare reform as has been seen in the past decade. (p. 27)

Though Black women, who encompass approximately 7% of the U.S. population, are not the majority of women on welfare, we do comprise a high percentage of welfare recipients—31.9% in 2010 (Office of Family Assistance, 2012). This disproportionate percentage of Black women in poverty can be thought to have led to the racialization of the poor. But Gilens (2003) argued that the racialization of the poor, the entwinement of poverty and African Americans, resulted from shifting media portrayals of poverty in the U.S and has caused unsympathetic, judgmental responses to Blacks who are poor (Gilens, 2003). Douglas and Michaels (2004) suggested, "If someone were to blurt out the words "welfare mother" right now, most Americans would immediately, without even thinking, picture an African-American woman in some urban ghetto with six kids by six different men" (p. 175). This welfare mother myth has been deliberately and dangerously constructed to vilify Black mothers who live in poverty. The worst characterizations of these mothers portray them as menaces to society or public enemies (Crooms, 1995). They are also portrayed as lacking virtue. Augustin (1997) surmised, "By rejecting the traditional familial structure, the welfare mother is culturally defined to exist at the

margins of a hood, virtuous society" (p. 147). The best portrayals view them as "sociological cripples whose crutch — welfare — must be knocked out from under them if they are to learn to walk" (Crooms, 1995, p. 611).

Black Women and U.S. Political Economy

Historically, African-American women have been pawns of a capitalistic economic system. Hill Collins apprised, "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 67). Echoing Hill Collins, Harris-Perry (2011) ascertained that these prescribed roles serve the interest of others and do not accurately reflect the lived experiences of Black women. For example, the hot mamma/Jezebel characterization justified the rape and sexual exploitation during slavery. Davis (1983) contends that female slaves, mainly because of their production capacity, were far more profitable than either free workers or male slaves. The mammy portrayal, the figure most acceptable of black womanhood, justified Black women being used for domestic work. Hurston's "mule" and Hughes' "pack-horse" metaphors reflect the reality of Black women's work. We historically have performed the arduous work that has led to the economic enrichment of others.

In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present,* Jones (2010) described slavery as a labor system that exploited Black women. She categorized Black women's Antebellum work as taking place in three arenas: their own households, their communities, and the slave economy that "reinforced their subordinate status as women and as blacks within American society" (Jones, 2010, p. 1). Hill Collins (1990) argued that Blacks were central to, yet outside of, the market economy. After slavery, Black

women's work was primarily in agriculture and domestic work (1990). Agricultural work was low-paid, exhausting, and differed very little from slavery (Hill Collins, 1990). Black women's agricultural work allowed for Whites to accrue wealth by exploiting their workers. In the domestic realm, they "washed toilets, made beds, polished silver, washed clothes, and scrubbed floors" (Omolade, 1994, p. 44). Not only did their domestic work make it possible for Whites to have a smooth and orderly private sphere, it allowed White women to earn wages performing work in newly developing industries. Often employed in fields that serve the more affluent, many Black women are the working poor: "Large numbers of U.S. Black women in the working poor are employed as cooks, laundry workers, nursing home aides, and child-care workers. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 66)

When it comes to work, Black women are the last hired to the work refused by White men, White women, and Black men (Cannon, 1995). Black women "are doing the most menial, tedious, and by far the most underpaid work, if they manage to get a job at all" (Cannon, p. 58, 1995). Still today, many Black women suffer from unemployment and underemployment, resulting in continual financial instability at best and poverty at worst. In a special edition of *The Review of Black Political Economy* devoted to Black women and work, Holder (2013) claimed, "While black women have made significant advances in the American labor market over the past four decades there is still further to go" (p. 25).

The impact of Black women's contribution to the U.S. political economy is an important aspect of a study that seeks to reveal the conditions and position of Black women in poverty. "The history of Black women, the current levels of poverty and unemployment which they experience, and the special problems they encounter in the workplace indicate that they occupy a

unique position in American society" (Scarborough, 1989, p. 1474). It is through thoroughly examining this objectionable position that positive change can take place.

Single Black Motherhood

In the 2014 documentary, *72%: The Single Mother Phenomenon in the African-American Community,* it is espoused that nearly three-fourths of African-American children are born to unmarried mothers. Words used by documentary contributors to describe this phenomenon are "epidemic," "alarming," "crisis," "travesty," and "frightening." According to Ruggles (1994), the incidence of single parents among Blacks is not new. In fact, this pattern of single-mother headed homes can be traced back as far 1850 (Ruggles, 1994). Omolade (1994) contended, "Today, Black single-motherhood is both chosen by and imposed on Black women attempting to address social and economic changes" (p. 22). Although this family structure has been deemed dysfunctional, others advocate for a rejection of outdated ideals surrounding mothering that never truly applied to Black mothers. Edin and Kefalas (2005), in *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage,* opposed conservative commentator Charles Murray's charge that the increase in non-marital births resulted directly from the government's financial support for poor single mothers. They believe, instead, that any explanation for the decline in marriage and the growth of non-marital births among the poor must take into account the U.S.'s shifting views about family life since the 1960's. As a result, Black single mothers should not be depicted as unsuitable when their choices simply reflect shifting cultural values.

In "Transcending traditional notions of mothering: The need for critical race feminist praxis," Wing and Weselmann (1999) called for an expansion of the definition of motherhood by moving beyond limited understandings of mothering. They also encouraged a resistance to

traditional ideologies about acceptable and unacceptable mothering. They offered, "Mothers who deviate from the white, middle-class, nuclear familial standard are frequently defined as bad mothers by the legal system" (Wing and Weselmann, 1999, p. 268). A similar sentiment is expressed by Gosa (2012) in his examination of mothering as reflected in rap music, "The popular mothering discourse has made it common sense that middle-class mothering styles are superior and necessary, while poor and Black mothers are portrayed as lazy, pathological, and even criminal" (p. 19). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) observes, "There is an ongoing tension between efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit systems of race, gender, and class oppression and efforts by African-American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood" (p. 118).

These scholars' work demand that Black mothers and Black mothering are not judged according to a standard of mothering that does not consider their cultural practices, historical influences, and contemporary social structures. Black mothering is and always has been a contextual undertaking. In "The social construction of the 'Immoral' black mother," Richie (1999) stresses, "Black women are portrayed as creating pathological forms of families as 'single heads of households,' as draining public resources, or as breeding too many children who pose physical, social, and economic risks to others" (p. 285). Socially constructing poverty as a problem of Black single mothers allows them to be vilified as others who are the cause of their own poverty (Crooms, 1995). Considering these sentiments, it should not come as a surprise that Black mothers are encouraged by political conservatives to marry (Reese, 2005) and that they are manipulated into using semi-permanent and permanent birth control (Roberts, 1999). Billingsley (1994) advised scholars to not measure Black families against a White norm that often results in deficit views of the African-American family. Instead, an Afrocentric approach, based on

recognition of the influence of African culture and history on African Americans, has proven to be more generative (Dickerson, 1995).

Black mothers who are poor disproportionately have been the victims of laws designed to punish them for not being "ideal" mothers. These laws "ignore the fact that the choices of these women are circumscribed by poverty" (Augustin, 1997, p. 145). One such law, *Learnfare*, was enacted in Wisconsin in 1988 (Augustin, 1997). *Learnfare* tied welfare recipients' welfare check to their minor children's school attendance (Augustin, 1997). Once a child exceeded the number of excused absences, the state deducted funds from the mother's welfare check. Augustin argued that *Learnfare* has a conceptual flaw: It assumes that "social deviancy" is endemic to the family rather than an effect of external sources (Augustin, 1997, p. 146). She continued by explaining that social problems such as truancy cannot be improved through punitive measures and that *Learnfare* denies the role of the state in ascribing poverty to people of color. Instead, *Learnfare* "makes the individual the cause of and solution to her own socioeconomic predicament" (Augustin, 1997, p. 148).

Similarly, Roberts (1997) criticized 1980's legislation that charged women with a crime after giving birth to babies who test positive for drugs. She apprised, "government intrusion" is especially harsh on women of color who are poor for several reasons: 1) They are least likely to obtain adequate prenatal care, 2) They are most vulnerable to government monitoring, and 3) They are least able to conform to the white middle-class standard of motherhood. The state's punitive response to mothers who use drugs while pregnant has a disproportionate impact on poor Black women mainly because they are more likely to have closer contact to government agencies and because of racist attitudes of health care professionals (Roberts 1997). Roberts remarks regarding the discrepancy between Black and White mothers is worth noting:

> Focusing on Black crack addicts rather than on other perpetrators of fetal harm serves two broader social purposes. First, prosecution of these pregnant women serves to degrade women whom society views as undeserving to be mothers and to discourage them from having children. If prosecutors had instead chosen to prosecute affluent women addicted to alcohol or prescription medication, the policy of criminalizing prenatal conduct very likely would have suffered a hasty demise. Society is much more willing to condone the punishment of poor women of color who fail to meet the middle-class ideal of motherhood. (Roberts 1997, p. 130)

This willingness to condone the punishment of poor women of color is part of a pattern of devaluating Black motherhood. Robert gives evidence to support her contention that the focus on crack cocaine is raced and gendered by citing a study indicated that while only 26 percent of pregnant women who used drugs in Pinellas County, Florida were Black, more than 90 percent of persecutions have been brought against Black women. Laws such as these point the finger at Black mothers without attributing even partial responsibility to "the intersection of three interrelated systems of domination: racism, classism, and patriarchy" (Augustin, 1997, p. 144).

Contemporary U.S. Black Women: A Snapshot

According to 2014 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Blacks comprise 13.4% of the United States population, with 52% of the Black population being Black women—almost 23 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) . The median income for Black households is $34,598, compared with the nation, $51,939. In terms of household composition, the highest percentage, 29%, are single women with families, more than twice the rate for all women. Nearly three-fourth (3/4) or 71% of Black women age 16-64 are in the workforce, 28% in service occupations. We make only 64 cents to the dollar compared to White, non-Hispanic men. The poverty rate for African

Americans is 27.2% and only 14.5% for Whites; the poverty rate for African American women is 28.6% in comparison to 10.8% of White women. Several conclusions can be drawn from these data: 1) Thmost common household composition for Blacks is the household led by a single woman with a family, likely a single mother. 2) Most Black women work outside the home, many employed in low-wage work. 3) Black women experience a drastic difference in pay when compared to White men. 4) The poverty rate for Black women is disproportionately high.

In this study, instead of using exacting federal poverty guidelines which often underestimate the costs associated with maintaining a household, poverty will be defined as having "income less than that deemed sufficient to purchase basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials" (Jenson, 2009, pp. 5-6) resulting in the need for government assistance in the form of welfare, food stamps, food vouchers, housing supplements, and/or health care. Though poverty continues to plague U.S. families, African-American families experience poverty disproportionately making economic stability a continued challenge for African-American families. Hattery and Smith (2007) contended, "Poverty is the most important and pressing issue facing African American families" (p. 206). These families are mainly headed by African-American women. In *Black Women in the United States, 2014*, the authors proposed that the condition of Black America is directly linked to the state of the Black woman: "In many ways, with 55 percent of Black children living in single parent households, the economic well-being of Black women is the economic well-being of Black America overall" (National Coalition of Black Civic Participation, 2014, p. 21). As a result of her important role in the economic security of her family and the wider Black community, the conditions and the positions of the single Black mother are most worthy of examination.

Recent Initiatives

Considering the context within which African American motherhood and womanhood have developed and the current plight of many African American women, I was most pleased to learn of two recent developments. They both signal a recognition of the need for focused and deliberate attention to the lives of African American women. First, on Tuesday, March 22, 2015, HuffPost reported, "Three black women in congress made history on Tuesday when they announced the formation of the first and only Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls" (Workneh, 2016, para 1). The goal of this caucus is to speak up for Black women who deserve a voice in a policy-making process that frequently minimizes or ignores the systemic challenges we face. (Workneh, 2016). Second, on Wednesday, March 23, NoVo Foundation announced what they described as "the largest commitment ever made by a private foundation to address the structural inequalities facing girls and women of color in the United States" (Press Releases, 2016). Their $90 million donation will fund grassroots programming and advocacy "designed to address the systemic and institutional challenges faced by girls and young women of color across the country" (NoVo Foundation, 2016). With a focus on including the voices of minoritized women in policy and practice, both initiatives show admirable promise.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a glimpse into factors that shape Black womanhood and motherhood—historically and in the present day. The lives of the study's participants will be examined within this multifaceted context.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature

My goal in this review of literature is to provide a broad, multi-faceted examination, crystallization, of my topic—Black single motherhood. As a result, included in this review are relevant television, films, and literature (primarily fiction) that have helped define Black single motherhood, especially among the poor. Next, I synthesize the results of relevant scholarly studies that have taken place over the last two decades, studies that contribute to academic discourse on Black womanhood and motherhood. Finally, I include directions for future research based on extant literature.

Narratives of Black Single Motherhood in Television, Films, and Literature

Narratives of Black motherhood seen in television, fiction, films, and fiction made into film have helped shaped discourse on the lived experiences of Black single mothers in poverty and are useful in supplementing the limited scholarly work on this topic. Through analyzing the depictions of Julia, Claudine, Lutie, several women in *The Color Purple*, Cora Lee, Precious, and Tisean, the diversity within single, Black motherhood becomes apparent. These narratives provide insight into their struggles and their strength, their vices and their victories, their relationships and their responsibilities. With the exception of Julia, these characterizations provide answers to the questions of the conditions and the position of Black women in poverty.

Early portrayals of Black motherhood on television include "Julia" (1968-1971) starring Diahann Carroll. Created just a few years after *The Moynihan Report* that labeled Black motherhood as pathology (1965), Julia is a single, widowed mother of one son. She is a nurse with a middle-income salary. It was considered by some an "assimilationist sitcom" in part because of its avoidance of racial issues during a turbulent time in the history of African-Americans in the U.S. but also because Julia did not represent the lives of many Black women during the sixties (American History for Travelers, 2012, para 35). Though Julia escapes most

stereotypes of Black women, she does fit the stereotype of the matriarch. In "A historical myth: Julia as a groundbreaking television show," the author contends, "Because Julia Baker ran the family, critics argued that the series seemingly perpetuated stereotypes about a 'Black matriarchy' in which black men had no place." (American History for Travelers, 2012, para 26). This is the same matriarchal-type family Moynihan blamed for the downfall of the Black family, a family which might be more appropriately labeled matrifocal.

Interestingly, Diahann Carroll, just three years later after "Julia" ended, played a film character that would be the opposite, in many respects, of Julia. Claudine, also the title of the movie, was a Black, single mother living in poverty (on welfare) with six children. Unlike "Julia," *Claudine* was certainly an activist film in which the economic injustice experienced by Black women and men are explicitly brought to the forefront. The film makes a strong indictment against the ways poor Black women are characterized, for example through this monologue by Claudine:

> Well haven't you heard about us ignorant Black bitches always got to be laying up with some dude just grinding out them babies for the taxpayers to take care of? I get thirty bucks apiece for them kids. You know I'm living like a queen on welfare, you know." (*Claudine*, 1974)

With rich dialogue and many scenes that take place within Claudine's home, it appears that the film's intent was to present the realities of the conditions and the social position of a Black single mother on welfare. While struggling to provide for her children, Claudine has no power to change the economic system that disenfranchises her. The film even includes a soundtrack on which many song lyrics are stories about Claudine's struggles or anthems against the system.

Undoubtedly, the welfare queen stereotype was one that the Black community refuted, even in the early 1970's.

Set it Off (1996) features four Black women—all friends living in poverty. Among these women is Tisean (T.T.), a single mother of a young son. Set in Los Angeles, the film depicts the extreme decisions (robbing banks) T.T. and her friends make as a result of their living conditions and perceived social position. T.T. is a housekeeper for a janitorial service and asks to get paid "under the table" to avoid having to pay taxes but is refused by her boss. As a result, she can't afford childcare and resorts to bringing her son to work with her, where he is accidentally poisoned by cleaning supplies. This incident results in Child Protective Services (CPS) removing her son from her custody. As a result of economic disenfranchisement, unjust treatment by social services, and police violence in their community, the women see themselves as positioned against the system. T.T. expresses a desire for work that pays a living wage, but she and her friends comment on how their neighborhood factory closing had resulted in extensive lay-offs. *Set it Off* is a socially conscious film that juxtaposes visions of wealth (the office building that the women clean) with scenes of poverty (the women's neighborhood) to show the large gap between the rich and the poor. To convey the film's theme—when the poor are denied opportunity for advancement, they sometimes lose hope and resort to illegal activity—the writers create an atypical scenario, four Black women as bank robbers.

Additionally, through literature written by Black women, readers are presented multifaceted narratives of Black mothers experiencing poverty. One of the earliest examples is Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). The novel's protagonist is Lutie Johnson, a single Black mother in Harlem who is separated but not legally divorced from her son's father. Because she moved away from her family, she does not have the intergenerational familial support that has come to

characterize African-American families. To support her son, she works as a domestic though she aspires to a career as a singer. Lutie's conflicts majorly involve the Black men in her life, one of whom she ends up beating to death as she defends herself from his sexual advances. Like many 21st century Black single mothers in poverty, Lutie struggles to raise a son who becomes a part of the criminal justice system at a young age.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Black mothers during the early twentieth century struggle mainly against sexism, racism, and capitalistic exploitation. Although they are impoverished, their lives are enriched by broad circle of friends and family. In fact, it is because of their strong kinship that their unmarried status is only an afterthought. They are surrounded by numerous blood and fictive kin who operate as co-parents. In one of these perplexing relationships, Sophia is raising Squeak's daughter although Squeak was Sophia's husband's lover and eventual wife. Despite the numerous intimate relationships and intra-relationships, the main characters comprise a loving family that is only sometimes connected by blood. These acts of counter-colonization demonstrate the main characters' ability to live lives and form relationships as they deem appropriate and a refusal to adopt hegemonic definitions of family. *The Color Purple*, later made into an Academy award-winning movie, certainly highlights the difficult conditions and the lowly position in which Black women find themselves; however, because of tenacity and sisterhood, they survive the sexism, racism, and capitalist exploitation they faced.

In a novel published the same year, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), tells the story of six Black women's struggle to survive in a low-income housing tenement in the North—Brewster Place. Of the six migrant (from the South) women, Cora Lee is perhaps most representative of a single, Black mother raising children in poverty. Juvenile-

like Cora Lee has several children with several men, and beyond the children's infancy, she does not attend to them. Her apartment is filthy because she watches soap operas all day instead of cleaning, her children are undisciplined, and her lovers are uncaring. She experiences domestic abuse from the men in her life, indictment from school officials, and, what she fears most, judgment from the other women of Brewster Place. Although she appears to love her children, she does not possess the maturity or resources necessary to properly care for them. Still, she dreams of a successful future for her children. In many ways, Cora Lee represents several myths about the unemployed single Black mother—lazy, unmotivated, and promiscuous. In addition to learning about the conditions of her life, readers also realize Cora Lee's low social status at her children's school, within her community, and in her relationships with men.

Another depiction of single motherhood in poverty is Sapphire's *Push* (1996). In *Push,* later adapted to the Academy award-winning film *Precious*, readers see a depiction of generational poverty. Precious, the protagonist, lives with her abusive mother who insists that Precious applies for welfare, continuing her family's dependence on government aid, to support the children she (Precious) bears as a result of being repeatedly raped by her father. Her mother does not want her to continue her education, but Precious decides to do so, and as a result, finds her voice through poetry. Though Precious is victimized by her parents and has many reasons to quit school, she persists and determines to give her children a childhood better than the one she had. Through Precious, we realize the difficulty some impoverished Black mothers face when trying to break the cycle of poverty. Her living conditions are deplorable, and the only power she discovers is in her poetry.

In these narratives, in which the main characters are Black women who are single mothers, audiences are allowed to peek behind the curtain to see the living conditions and social

positions of Black women in poverty. In most cases, the women experience abuse, lack, and victimization—all while trying to raise children. The work that most closely fulfills the goals of my present project is the film *Claudine* as it directly challenges the welfare queen stereotype. It most descriptively conveys the conditions of a poor Black mother, purposely shows her struggle to overcome institutional obstacles, and reveals her powerlessness as a result of being in a multiply oppressed social position.

Scholarly Studies into Black Motherhood

The Black Mother within the Black Family.

Many studies of Black women are couched in studies of Black families (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn & Zamsky, 1994; Billingsley, 1994; Billingsley, 1998; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005; Hattery & Smith, 2007; Hattery & Smith, 2012). Brewer (1988) describes the situation of Black women in poverty as a "powerful and complex interplay between capitalism, racial oppression, and Black family life" (p. 332). As a result of this interplay, it is advantageous to consider these women in the context of their families. Research reveals that a salient aspect of these families is the role of the grandmother. Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn and Zamsky (1994) contend that studying young, single mothers in isolation from their families causes one to "miss much of the story of these young women's lives" (p. 390) because of the valuable role played by grandmothers who oftentimes parent their daughter's child. This "role flexibility" is fairly common in African-American family systems (Hines & Franklin-Boyd, 2005, p. 89). Grandmothers' roles range from becoming the primary parent to their grandchildren to household manager (George & Dickerson, 1995). Hines and Franklin-Boyd (2005) found that grandmothers often play a central role in African-American families and that the three generation

system can often be a source of strength. However, Dickerson and George (1995) express concern over the economic standing of these mothers and grandmothers:

> The increase in the proportion of single female heads of households, and the likelihood that a majority of young and adolescent mothers bring their babies home to their mother's home mean that more women are becoming the head of poor three-generation households . . . . Multiple generations of poor single female heads of households leave the extended family depleted . . . (p. 154)

The dismal situation Dickerson and George described intensify the structural challenges that already exist for Black single mothers.

The Black Single Mother.

While Black family studies are quite expansive, studies exclusively of the individual, the Black, single mother are much more limited. The findings of several successful scholarly projects from the late 1980's to the present, however, have added complexity, contradiction, and depth to the existing narrow perceptions and numerous misconceptions of Black, single motherhood. A review of these works follows in a chronological fashion.

Studies in the 1980's.

Before the scholarly studies of Black single mothers in the 1990's and 2000's, two Black single mothers (Omolade, 1986 & Williams, 1988) published revelatory books about their experiences. It is their attempts to define their own lives. Omolade (1986), in an autoethnographic narrative, revealed the intricacies of life as a Black single mother in *It's a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers*. Through her own experiences, the experiences of her friends, and statistical data, she unveiled challenges Black single mothers face: securing housing, low-wages, child care, scrutiny from social services, and forming

intimate relationships with men. Omolade also challenged myths about laziness and lack of motivation among welfare recipients. Finally, she detailed the importance of resources and support through kinship, sisterhood, and organizations. Through this narrative, Omolade exposed not only the economic impact of Black single motherhood but also the routine discrimination these women face. Countering myths with every day realities, she presented a firsthand perspective of Black single mothers, as I do in this study. Similarly, Williams (1988) expressed her innermost feelings about single (divorced) motherhood in *A Single Black Mother*, a modest book of poetry accompanied by illustrations. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the book is its cover—an illustration of a woman with tears rolling down her face and a boy in the foreground. Like the illustration, the opening poem expressed her sadness and fear of raising a "black boy child" alone (1988, p. 6). A melancholy tone is also sensed in "Single Parenthood" as the mother laments her divorce: "Divided forever by the divorce Courts code" (1998, p. 12). The poem disclosed the mother's financial struggles and her fear of what will come of her son. In two additional poems, the author wrote about the time wasted applying for welfare and contentment living in government projects. Both autobiographical works shed light on the plight of Black, single mothers in poverty. While Williams' book of poems is deeply personal and emotional, Omolade's book aimed to reveal her reality as a single, Black mother experiencing poverty. She clearly hoped to bring awareness about her living conditions and her position in the social hierarchy.

Studies in the 1990's.

Jarrett (1994, 1996, & 1998), an African-American female sociologist, conducted several studies of impoverished African-American single mothers and their families. The goal of Jarrett's 1994 study was to "expand on the structural explanation [for poverty] by describing the

ways that African-American women live in poverty" (Jarrett, 1994, p. 31). Through focus group interviews of single, African-American mothers who are poor, Jarrett found that the study participants saw marriage as the ideal, were pessimistic about marriage being a reality, faced economic impediments to marriage because of Black men's employment instability, and thus formed alternative family structures including supportive kinships. In a 1996 focus group study, Jarrett found that social stigma is a major concern of Black single mothers in poverty. Focus group women described stigma in two dimensions: economic—rejecting the American work ethic, and familial—not conforming to conventional family patterns and being inadequate parents (Jarrett, 1996). Harris-Perry (2011, p. 108) elaborated on a similar emotion felt by Black women—shame. She described stigmatizing shame as insidious, designed to label individuals as outcasts. "Shame makes us view our very selves as malignant" (2011, p. 109). Viewing themselves as social outcasts who are in some ways "bad" undoubtedly affects their womanhood and motherhood. These studies reveal how the participants adapted to poverty (relying on kinships and resisting marriage) and how poverty caused them to feel about themselves.

Jarrett's 1998 article focused on how African-American women experience poverty, how these experiences impact their decision-making, and how they cope with economic marginality. She found that these single mothers held conventional views about marriage (marriage being the cornerstone of family life), about childbearing (childbearing should take place within marriage), and sought non-nuclear family strategies for child care and support, including welfare and their own mothers. Her findings illustrated that although African-American single mothers hold conventional beliefs about marriage and family, they adapted to their circumstances in ways that were non-conventional (Jarrett, 1998).

In the late 1990's, at least four book-length publications addressed the lives of women who are impoverished. Zucchino's (1997) *Myth of the Welfare Queen*, Edin and Lein's (1997) *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*, and Dodson's (1999) *Don't Call Us Out of Name: The Untold Lives of Women and Girls in Poor America* and Seccombe's "*So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?" Welfare Recipients' Perspectives on the System and its Reform* (1999) provide rich firsthand narratives of mothers who are unfairly stigmatized for being poor. These publications followed President Bill Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed in August 1996. PRWORA set strict guidelines for welfare recipients, forcing many from welfare to low-pay labor. According to Orleck (2005), this legislation ended sixty years of guaranteed federal aid to the poorest citizens of the U.S. Not surprisingly, the next decade (1996-2006) would be a fruitful one for scholars interested in appraising the results of this landmark legislation in the lives of those most affected by the legislation.

Through his almost-yearlong observations of Odessa and Cheri, two so-called welfare mothers, Zucchino (1997) discovered a woman who sifts through trash to provide for her children and grandchildren and another who works tirelessly on behalf of the homeless, both dispelling the myth that mothers on welfare are lazy and unproductive. Zucchino's ethnographic study is similar to this project, as both delved into the everyday reality of Black, single mothers experiencing poverty. It exposed both the living conditions and the social position of Odessa and Cheri. Similarly, Edin and Lein (1997) examined the effects low poverty thresholds have on welfare recipients. This ethnographic work included 50 participants, all welfare recipients, with the goal of highlighting how they survive on welfare and low-wage work. The researchers found that the women interviewed almost always consumed material resources beyond what they

received from welfare. They were able to meet their needs that were unmet by welfare mostly because of unreported income from off-the-book employment, boyfriends, and family members. Most interestingly, Edin and Lein (1997) found that when women transition from welfare to low-wage work, their net expenses increase: child care, transportation, decreased housing subsidies, and reduced food stamps. They hope that their work influences policy with the specific goal of encouraging new poverty thresholds.

With the goal of welfare policy reform, Dodson's (1999) book is the result of years of ethnographic research (interviews, focus groups, surveys, and life histories) conducted with women and girls who are poor. The women and girls (hundreds) are from multiple racial backgrounds—not just African-American, and they are not all single mothers. Dodson insisted that this is not a book about welfare reform, teen pregnancy, and work programs; it is a book about people, "women who are savvy, complex, and challenging" (ix). One of the most striking aspects of Dodson's book is the women who were activists working on the behalf of women like them to bring about change in what they know as a dysfunctional, heavily bureaucratic social services system. Omolade (1986) described this system as a tedious, time-consuming one in which women's days are spent in courts, offices, schools, and sometimes hotels and shelters. As the title suggests, *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?" Welfare Recipients' Perspectives on the System and its Reform,* Seccombe (1999) revealed welfare recipients' perspectives on the welfare state and welfare reform. Using a critical and feminist lens, Seccombe sought to uncover the meaning of motherhood, family, welfare, work, and dependence in their everyday lives. Three themes surface from her research: 1) affluent women have more in common with poor women than they probably realize, 2) current reforms are predicated on changing assumptions about appropriate women's roles within the marketplace and within the family, and 3) many people

believe that poor women enjoy the "free ride" they get from the welfare system at taxpayer expense. Her in-depth ethnographic research with welfare recipients contradicts the myth that welfare recipients live extravagantly. Participants included women from diverse racial backgrounds.

Studies in the 2000's.

Scholarly examination into the lives of single Black women who are poor continued during the turn of the century. Several books added to our understanding of their lives. *Sugar's Life in the Hood* (Turner & Bachrach Ehlers, 2002) is the story of the life of "Sugar Turner," an African-American mother who was once on welfare. It is co-authored, in an autoethnographic way, with anthropologist Tracy Bachrach Ehlers who immersed herself in Sugar's life for five years. As Sugar narrated her experiences in poverty—the stigma of receiving welfare, her unreported work as a hairdresser, her bad choices with men, her dreams that are "just like everybody else" (p. 95), readers see a savvy woman who has learned to live a complicated life. By the end of the book, Sugar is no longer on welfare, has completed college coursework towards her associate's degree, is employed full-time employed, and is happily married.

Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform (Hays, 2003) focused on the ramifications experienced by welfare recipients after President Clinton's Personal Responsibility Act was passed in 1996. Hays conducted ethnographic research in welfare offices and in the homes of mothers transitioning from welfare to work. Although Clinton's act was considered a success because it reduced the number of women on welfare, the consequences were anything but positive for the women and their children who were no longer covered. Through first person perspectives, readers get a glimpse into the struggles of poor women with

children as they are forced into work for menial wages. The women (and teenagers) are from multiple racial backgrounds—not just African-American—and are wed and unwed.

DeParle's (2004) *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare* is the stories of three African-American women, Angela Jobe, Jewell Reed, and Opal Caples (all cousins) as they transitioned from welfare to work. DeParle positioned their experiences in a broader context of welfare reform, particularly President Clinton's drive to end welfare. As stated earlier, in 1996, Clinton signed a bill abolishing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), with time limits, work requirements, and increased state control. TANF forced Angela, Jewell, and Opal off welfare and into work. The author traced the subjects' genealogy back to slavery and showed the difficulty descendants of slaves face in trying to achieve the American Dream.

Hancock (2004) focused specifically on the "welfare queen" stereotype, the common public identity of welfare recipients created from the misperception that they are all or mostly single mothers who are poor and African-American. She analyzed how this public identity leads to a *politics of disgust* that perverts democratic attention and adversely impacts the lives of welfare recipients. She traced this public identity back to African-American women during slavery—their supposed laziness and fecundity. Chapter 5 is particularly interesting, as Hancock (2004) through seven in-depth interviews, "explore[d] how welfare recipients contend with the politics of disgust" (p. 118). Her findings indicate that these women are aware of how they are perceived, try to shield their children from what is being said about them, and acknowledge the need for welfare reform. She argued that to eradicate the public identity of the welfare queen,

these women must define and identify themselves. Self-identification, the power of voice, is a key tenet of Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 1990, 2000, 2008).

Orleck (2005) narrated the grassroots efforts of poor Black mothers in the Las Vegas as they fought their own war on poverty, especially focusing on the work of Ruby Duncan. She framed these women's efforts around federal welfare legislation, including President Bush's Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone Act (PRIDE). She suggested an approach to addressing poverty that includes the voices of those most impacted by "reform." She asked, "What if we tried another approach toward poverty policy and asked poor parents what they need to revitalize their communities and lift their families out of poverty?" (Orleck, 2005, p. 305). Both Hancock's and Orleck's books placed the woman at the center of analysis, thereby empowering their subjects to narrate their conditions and position. By approaching their projects from the perspective of the women, they were able to broaden readers' knowledge and understanding of life as a single, Black woman in poverty. This, too, is the goal and approach of my study.

In one of the most recent book-length treatments of Black women in poverty, Davis (2012) considered how domestic violence influences Black women's use of welfare. Davis described her book as a feminist ethnography because it privileges women's stories (feminist) and because she wants to effect change in welfare reform policy through the study of human experience (ethnography). She wrote thirteen life histories of the twenty-two women she interviewed. Davis (2012) claimed that women use welfare for a variety of reasons, "including as an immediate strategy to deal with domestic violence" (p. 13). Her findings were consistent with participants in Seccombe's study who "were fleeing abusive relationships" (1999, p. 91).

Last, *Black Single Mothers and the Child Welfare System*, by social worker Brandynicole Brooks, is a guide for social service workers who work with Black mothers (Brooks, 2015). Brooks began by explaining the historical purpose of the child welfare system—to ensure the safety, permanence, and well-being of children. Based primarily on her experience as a social worker, Brooks drew upon critical race theory and intersectional theoretical frameworks to convey the importance of viewing Black single mothers from a strengths-based, solution focused model, as opposed to a deficit perspective. Significant to note, Brooks exposed the racism, sexism, and classism within social services, including the ways stereotypes about Black women influences eugenics/sterilization practices. Another interesting aspect of the book revealed the complex reasons why African American women are overrepresented in the child welfare system: differences in child-rearing and disciplinary practices that result in African American single mothers as being deemed as abusive, distorted images of African American single mothers, and the belief that something is inherently wrong with African American single mothers' culture and values.

In sum, with the exception of Brooks' book, which is written from a practitioner perspective, a common feature among these works is the valuing of women's voices. Each author explored in a qualitative way what it means to be a mother who is poor, with several focusing specifically on Black women. In addition to revealing the conditions and position of the women, the authors situated the women's lives within specific contexts—the social, economic, and political systems in which the participants were engulfed. In these ways, my work will extend this trajectory.

Scholars' Call for Further Research

In *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (hooks, 1995), I find a strong impetus for my work: "We must vigilantly challenges negative representations of black women, understanding that they both shape public policy and determine attitudes towards us in everyday life" (p. 85). In hopes of altering "old ways of thinking about black female reality," this project centers on the participants' perceptions of their conditions and position based on their lived experiences (hooks, 1995, p. 78). The most cogent call for further study, which came even before Clinton's 1996 welfare reform, is reflected in the words of Dickerson (1995):

> This [*African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families]* is certainly not the first publication to challenge conventional views on African American single mothers and their families . . . we must continue to update, expand, and refine this renewed knowledge and then put it into constant practice until it is absorbed into the 'ordinary' knowledge base. (xxviii)

Even though the scholarly studies included in this review were conducted after Dickerson's call, I contend that knowledge of impoverished Black women's lives has not become "ordinary." My aim in this study, then, is to continue to "update, expand, and refine" knowledge of single Black mothers who experience poverty. Specifically, I illuminate the extent to which their living conditions mirror persistent stereotypes and mythical portrayals. I update existing knowledge by focusing on contemporary social, political, and economic conditions. Almost twenty years after Clinton's welfare reform and fifty years after Johnson's war on poverty, I examine the present conditions and position of Black women who are poor.

Additionally, Thornton Dill (1983) identified another area for systematic investigation—the relationship between social structures and Black women's self-perception. Specifically, she

noted a need for studies to examine "how black women perceive themselves with regard to the structures of race, gender, and class" (p. 33). This is the second part of my query—their view of their position in the social hierarchy. Wilkins (2012) contended that even though race, class, and gender have been imposed upon individuals, we actively claim and manipulate these meanings in everyday life. This study provided a space for participants to explore their social identity—what their race, class, and gender mean in their perceptions of their social status.

It has now been fifty years since the release of *The Moynihan Report*, perhaps the single most influential document in shaping contemporary public perceptions of the Black family and Black women in particular. In this report, Moynihan wrote, "It [the Negro family] is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time. There is probably no single fact of Negro American life so little understood by whites" (1965, p. 5). Perhaps this examination will deepen outsiders' understanding of Black families, specifically of impoverished African American single mothers.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

"Gaining insight into the everyday lives of African-American women and how they interpret them requires conscious methodological approaches and research practices." —Leah Mullings, 2000, p. 20

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to create a space that encourages the voice of Black women experiencing poverty by inviting them to teach those outside their world about their living conditions and their self-perceived position in the United States social hierarchy. "Condition" is defined as a way of everyday living or a standard of living, while "position" refers to hierarchical location as related to other groups. The participants are single (unmarried) mothers who draw upon government assistance for financial support. A specific form of narrative inquiry, life history research, is the methodology employed to find answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do the self-defined lives of three African American single mothers experiencing poverty reflect and/or contradict two commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes about poor African American mothers?
    a. What are their living conditions?
    b. What lifestyles are they afforded?
    c. What are their everyday experiences?
    d. In what ways do they embody motherhood?
2. How do three African American single mothers in poverty perceive themselves??
    a. From their perspectives, where do they stand in the present day in relation to privilege, power, vulnerability, and oppression?
    b. In what ways do they think the position of impoverished Black women has changed over the last fifty years?

Three Epistemic Frames.

My research design is rooted in three epistemic frames: Black feminist epistemology, Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and endarkened feminist epistemology; each can be considered one of several critical raced-gendered epistemologies. First, Black feminist epistemology is described as such:

> Black feminist epistemology stresses the importance of Black women's social locations for how they create and validate knowledge, claiming that their shared experiences can foster group knowledge that can inform political action. It emphasizes the fact that Black women can face multiple, interlocking oppressions of gender and race as well as classism and heterosexism (Allen, 2009, p. 75).

This project validates the curriculum that *is* the poor Black woman and privileges the knowledge she holds as a result of her social location. Second is Afrocentric feminist epistemology, espoused by leading Black feminist thinker, Patricia Hill Collins. Hill Collins (1989) theorized that Black women's standpoint is the foundation of Black feminist thought. She contended that Black women's standpoint, as a collective, allows us to experience a different world from those who are <u>not</u> Black and female. Black women's standpoint needs individuals who are part of the group to express the group's standpoint (Hill Collins, 1989). The formulation and rearticulating of this standpoint is the beginning of Black feminist thought. Afrocentric feminist epistemology challenges Eurocentric masculinist knowledge-validation by placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis. Afrocentric feminist epistemology rests on four hallmarks: 1) concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning, 2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, 3) the ethic of caring, and 4) the ethic of personal accountability (Hill Collins, 1990). This study reflects the value I place on wisdom gained from experiences,

connectedness formed through dialogue, and caring expressed through empathetic listening and speaking.

Closely related to Afrocentric feminist epistemology is the third epistemology frame—Dillard's endarkened feminist epistemology: "Endarkened feminist epistemology articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of global Black feminist thought" (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011, p. 148). Endarkened feminist epistemology acknowledges a difference in cultural standpoints from White feminism in that it is located at the overlap of multiple oppressions. This acknowledgement of the overlapping of multiple oppressions call for intersectional analysis, an approach deeply embedded in Black feminist principles. These epistemological frameworks, among others, are what Delgado Bernal (2002) refers to as critical raced-gendered epistemologies. Critical raced-gendered epistemologies 1) view the experiential knowledge of communities of color as strength, 2) allow for the creation of new theories that understand multidimensional identities, and 3) affirm experiences and responses to different forms of oppression and validates them as appropriate forms of data (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 116). In this way, critical raced-gendered epistemologies allow researchers to bring together layered identities and experiences for examination—work that is germane to accomplishing the goals of this study. These three frameworks—Black feminist epistemology, Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and endarkened feminist epistemology—make important epistemic statements that reflect my value for the distinctive ways of knowing and knowledge held by Black women due to our social locations. By approaching the study from these frames—that value experiences as valid forms of data—I am able to center the lived experiences of marginalized Black women, making their conditions and position visible. These critical raced-gendered epistemologies support a Black feminist research agenda.

Black Feminist Research & Culturally Sensitive Research.

In "African-American Women Making Themselves: Notes on the Role of Black Feminist Research," Mullings (2000) offered instructions on effective Black feminist research practices. They must be collaborative, requiring reflections on the relationship of the researcher to the community, which I captured in reflexive memos. The research relationship must reflect the researcher's "identification with and responsibilities towards the African-American community" (Mullings, 2000, p. 27). Finally, the research must link itself to social action that allow for change. Even though this project's purpose is descriptive rather than prescriptive, the findings may be used to inform social and political action. In addition to adhering to principles of Black feminist research espoused by Mullings, I appreciate Tillman's (2002, p. 6) five-pronged framework for culturally sensitive research, particularly with African-Americans:

1) Culturally sensitive research approaches use qualitative methods such as interviews (individual, group, life history), observation, and participant observation.
2) Culturally sensitive research approaches use the particular and unique self-defined (Black self-representation) experiences of African Americans.
3) Culturally sensitive research approaches attempt to reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations that may minimize, marginalize, subjugate, or exclude the multiple realities and knowledge bases of African Americans.
4) Culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans position experiential knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and necessary for analyzing, understanding, and reporting data. Analysis and presentation that is appropriate to the research topic and the individual or group under study is co-constructed.

5) Culturally sensitive research approaches can lead to the development of theories and practices that are intended to address the culturally specific circumstances of the lives of African Americans.

Qualitative Inquiry.

Mullings' Black feminist research and Tillman's culturally sensitive research principles nicely align with qualitative inquiry. Qualitative inquiry focuses on human subjects in naturalistic environments. It does not seek to influence, manipulate, or control subjects or environments. Qualitative research integrates the researcher in the process, which may lead to a transformative impact for both subjects and researchers. With a deep respect for human subjects, qualitative researchers seek to illuminate lived experiences from the perspectives of subjects and to acknowledge the role of context in shaping lives. Because of these defining attributes, qualitative inquiry will serve my research interests well.

Crystallization.

Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative research as "inherently multimethod" (2011, p. 5). While *triangulation*, the use of multiple data collection methods to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question is one metaphor that could be used to convey the multifaceted nature of qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I favor the term *crystallization.*

> Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about

> socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4).

By using the crystal as a metaphor for this method, I recognize the importance of "interweaving" research processes: discovery, seeing, telling, storying, representation (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, p. 122). The written document, the crystal, represents complexity, partiality, and multiplicity of perspectives (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul 1997, p. 35). In viewing research as crystallization, scholars accept the certainty of uncertainties, questions the answers, and appreciates the complexities and ambiguities of qualitative inquiry. The concept of crystallization mirrors basic constructivist beliefs about reality and knowledge—that realities are constructed and co-constructed socially, culturally, and historically and that knowledge is transactional and subjectivist (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p. 122). These beliefs undergird this investigation. Additionally, in this study, crystallization also refers to the multiple genres of literature used to illuminate the historical and contemporary lives of African American mothers. As is evidenced in the literature review, poetry, fiction, film, and academic scholarship provide a rich reflection of motherhood from the perspective of African American single mothers.

Crystallization draws upon the most common qualitative data collection methods: interviews, observations, and collection of artifacts such as photos, blogs, letters, emails, and memorabilia. Just as a crystal reflects varied viewpoints, each interrelated practice "makes the word visible in a different way" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). A particular form of qualitative inquiry, narrative inquiry, is used in this study. Narrative inquiry is motivated by "an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (Chase, 2011, p. 421). It is argued that narrative inquiry should begin and end in the everyday experiences of research subjects (Chase, 2011). Because of this focus on everyday experiences, narrative inquiry is uniquely suited to

answer my first research question: To what extent do the living conditions, inclusive of their day-to-day experiences, of Black women experiencing poverty reflect and/or contradict two commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes about poor Black women. In narrative inquiry, the goal is not to determine the accuracy of subjects' stories but to understand the meanings attached to those experiences. In fact,

> Telling stories about one's life is a process – not of documenting the truth of what exactly happened. Instead, the act of telling the story is a process of recording how the teller of the tale presently sees her position in relation to the subject/topic being discussed. (Samuel, 2009, p.3)

Perhaps the most appealing quality of narrative lies in its potential to shape discourse: "The stories of marginalized groups and oppressed people shape the contemporary narrative landscape" (Chase, 2012, p. 428). As with Black feminist research (Mullings, 2000), narrative inquiry offers the possibility of change and social justice (Chase, 2011).

Life History Research.

Life history research, a narrative inquiry research methodology, is the approach used in this project. Through life history research, one is able to examine culture through one individual's history of life within the culture, capturing the individual's feelings, views, and perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study, I examined the lives of Black women in poverty through the eyes of individuals living within the culture. Life history research provides the opportunity to "collect rich data textured by the respondents' own interpretations of their experiences and the social circumstances in which their story has unfolded, and the ways in which they continue to be active agents" (Sosulski, Buchanan, & Donnell, 2010, p. 37). Likewise, life history researchers view "the individual as a window into broader social and

societal conditions" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12). With an emphasis on individual experience as it is intertwined with the larger social-economic-political milieu , life history research allows me to accomplish the goals of this project—to study the individual as influenced by her context. Life history research serves broad purposes, as defined by Cole and Knowles (2001) in *Lives in Contest: The Art of Life History Research:*

> Life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans. It is about understanding a situation, profession, condition, or institutions through coming to know how individuals walk, talk, live, and work within that particular context. It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. (p. 11)

The two goals of my project are to reveal the self-defined condition, as opposed to externally imposed stereotypes, of the impoverished Black woman and to discover how she views her social position given the conditions of her life. Life history research allows me to focus my project as such, as the investigation of the nature of the individual-culture or individual-social system relationship is one of the most popular uses of life history research (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). As is characteristic of qualitative research in general, life history research is a messy endeavor.

> Life history research presents an opportunity to its users to be able to think and look at the world for its blurry bits, its complexities and complications. The world is not capable of being reduced into simplicities. The writers of life histories should hope only to have presented fresh illuminations of the phenomenon being investigated.

This, then, is my aim—to get at, in a fresh way, the human experience of being an African American single mother living in poverty in the United States.

Sites and Participants

Cole and Knowles (2001) asserted that the conventional life history project involves only a small number of participants and usually takes place over an extended period of time. Three participants committed to this project for several months in order to gain insight into a mutual interest—the condition and position of African American single mothers in poverty (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Participants in this life history project are Faith, Jackie, and Taneya. I identified the participants in various ways. Faith and I are friends on social media. In a private conversation on Facebook, I invited her to participate in this study. Jackie emailed me after reading a blog post I wrote. I met Taneya through a relative and subsequently invited her to participate in the study. As Dodson (1999) exclaimed, "the names given to these life histories were not mine to choose but should be self-chosen, and therefore, people named themselves" (p. 248). Both Faith and Jackie initially expressed that they wanted to use their real names, but upon further consideration decided upon aliases. The three participants meet the following criteria:

1) Identify as Black or African-American,

2) Are single (unmarried) mothers,

3) Are currently raising school-aged children,

4) Utilize government assistance to sustain themselves and their child(ren), and

5) Were willing to engage in self-reflection and to be observed over a sustained period time.

Another commonality among the participants, though not a selection criteria, is teenage motherhood. Each of the mothers in the study became mothers during their late teens as a result of unplanned pregnancies: Faith at 19, Taneya at 15, and Jackie, 19. Their early motherhood

marked “a time of great change and the beginning of overwhelming troubles” (Dodson, 1998, p. 83).

The research participants were eager for the opportunity to teach others about their lives. They spoke about wanting others to know what their lives are *really* like. Just as Sugar Turner partnered with anthropologist Tracy Bachrach Ehlers in *Sugar’s Life in the Hood: The Story of a Former Welfare Mother*, these women wanted me to give voice to their stories. In her initial email to me, Jackie wrote, “I would love to talk with you more about my perspective.” Taneya stated she wanted to let somebody know what she goes through in life. At the conclusion of my last interview with Faith, she encouraged me to “Keep going go talk to other people.” Each participant received Wal-Mart gift cards in the amount of $200 in appreciation of their contributions to this project.

Data Collection

As is characteristic of narrative inquiry, generally, and life history research, specifically, I used in-depth interviews, including participatory social mapping interviews, and observations to collect data. In a few cases, I used social media private messages and text messages as data sources, with permission.

In-depth Interviews.

Because of their potential for gathering rich first-hand data, in-depth interviews, in which the interviewee-interviewer relationship is transformed into narrator-listener, were the primary method of data collection (Chase, 2012). These interviews were more like conversations in which I, the researcher, offered general topics and respected how the participant framed and structured the responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because the best life history interviews explore “the relationship of personal history to broader historical events and social themes,”

topics focused on participants' lives as a microcosm of our society (Shopes, 2012, p. 452). The aim of these interviews was to record everyday life within their particular locales (Shopes, 2012).

Both informal and formal interviews were used to collect data. Informal interviews usually "flow from a situation" and occur with less planning than formal interviews (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, and Steinmetz (2000, p. 57). For example, I conducted informal interviews with Jackie while she was waiting to gain entry to her home after being locked out because of overdue rent and with Taneya while driving forty-five miles to apply for a government-issued identification. Formal interviews are more arranged and carried out away from action to allow for in-depth conversation (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 2000). The major purpose of the formal interview is to "learn to see the world from the eye of the person being interviewed" (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 2000, p. 58).

Participatory Social Mapping Interviews.

The formal interviews included participatory social mapping, as defined by Emmel (20008). In participatory social mapping, researchers employ visual methods in an interview setting to interrogate qualitative questions. As a complement to the conventional verbal interview, mapping interviews are used to map knowledge, understanding, and interpretation (Emmel, 2008). It also provides the interviewer with a record that can be interrogated as it is being drawn, during its crafting by the participant, and when it is completed. It is a tangible representation that accompanies the interview transcript. The audio recording must be transcribed to accompany the map, and analysis is done as with any qualitative data-through immersion, organizing the data, and identifying categories, typologies and concepts. The participatory mapping interviews proceeded in a manner similar to the traditional in-depth interviews described above, except that several questions solicited both verbal responses and

visual representations. As an example of a mapping interview prompt, participants were asked to complete a pre-made graphic organizer that depicted their household expenses. In the case with Taneya, who held her baby and attended to her children during interviews, mapping interviews were limited.

In sum, I conducted two hour-long formal mapping interviews as previously described and one analysis interview with each participant over a three month period, for a total of approximately150-180 minutes of audio for each participant. Van Manen (1990) described the follow-up, or analysis, interview:

> Once transcript themes have been identified by the researcher then these themes may become objects of reflection in follow-up hermeneutic conversations in which both the researcher and the interviewee collaborate. (p. 99)

More on the analysis interview is explained in "Data Analysis."

My interviewing was inspired by three of Bloom's (1998) propositions of feminist methodology:

1. Feminist methodology should break down the one-way hierarchical relationship between interviewer/interviewee that characterizes traditional research interviewing. They are dialogic, engaged, interactive, and open-ended.
2. Feminist researchers give focused attention to and non-judgmental validation to respondents' personal narratives.
3. Feminist researchers strive for egalitarian relationships that make space for participants to narrate their stories as they desire, focus on what is most important to them, and participate in the interpretation of their narratives.

Similar points were echoed by Larson (1997, p. 456), a feminist scholar who deepened her understanding of narrative inquiry through being a research participant. She suggested a rethinking of traditional monological interview practices and use of dialogical processes that help story-givers in "untangling the complex meanings of their own lived experiences." Additionally, she advised feminist researchers to value clarifying and interpreting the meanings of stories with story-givers as much as we value gathering them (Larson, 1997). Interview questions were generated from the life history interview general topics adapted from Cole and Knowles (2001):

1. Family heritage, including racial background and ethnic and familial cultures
2. Family and individual health and well-being
3. Relationships with significant other(s)/intimate partner(s)
4. Socioeconomic conditions of family, community, and city/town
5. General conditions (level of safety, cleanliness, resources, etc.) of community and city/town
6. Religious influences and practices
7. Influences of gender, race, and socioeconomic status
8. Educational background and the influence of educational institutions, such as formal schools, churches, and community/recreational organizations
9. Political conditions, such as the climate of political decision making and the state, or not, of democracy and free speech, as well as the state of local and national politics
10. Fundamental, personal assumptions about the relationships of self to context in all its forms
11. Goals and aspirations for self and children
12. Hobbies and extracurricular activities

13. Employment/ Work

A research questions/interview topics matrix (see Appendix A) shows possible relationships between research questions and the listed life history interview topics. An "x" in a square indicates that a particular interview topic may yield data that can be used to address one of the study's specific questions. Appendix B is a list of interview questions used with participants.

Observations.

Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, and Steinmetz (2000) believed that there is a connection between interviewing and observing, "Interviewing cannot be divorced from looking, interacting, and attending to more than the actual interview words" (p. 43). As a result, observations and direct experience yielded another set of data. Spending time observing in a setting of which a participant is a part, such as an institution, home, or workplace, can provide invaluable insights and provides an important perspective (Cole & Knowles, 2001). I observed participants alone and as they interacted with their children and in various settings. Documentation of these observations takes the form of written field notes, audio notes, and photography/videography, when possible. Thick descriptions were written in a section of my reflexive journal designated "Observation Log". I followed Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul's (1997, p. 341) guidance: "The first step [of an observer] is really to look at and listen to what is going on: the visual aspects of the scene; the mood it evokes for the viewer; the language, signs of emotion, and actions of those studied and one's own emotions as participant-observer." One of these observing opportunities happened when I took Taneya to the grocery store to purchase groceries. I was able to observe the way she approached shopping, the items she selected, and how she interacted with her children while at the grocery store. My observations with Faith were the most mundane as most

of her days are spent at home on the computer doing homework and searching for jobs. I asked myself questions to guide the thick descriptions including, "What is going on here?" and "What is the experience like for these people?" (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997, p. 344). Data from the field observation log were coded and analyzed as described in the section on data analysis. A chart in Appendix D is a record of the data-collection activities with each participant.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry often involves coding data for themes or categories. After interviews were transcribed and data were organized, I used coding to identify emergent key words, trends, ideas, or themes within the collected data (Schwandt, 2007; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011). Thematic analyses focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (themes). Codes are developed to represent the identified themes and linked to raw data for later analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011). Coding takes mainly three forms: abbreviations of key words, colored dots, or numbers (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I used abbreviations of key words as codes in my data analysis.

For the first round of coding, I used an exploratory approach--reading through the transcripts (two for each participant), highlighting any parts that seemed interesting or relevant to the study, and assigning codes to these segments. I also assigned codes based on whether they appeared to contribute to emerging themes or patterns (Schwandt, 2007). I extracted three to four major ideas or themes from each participant's transcripts (see number 3 below). Simultaneously, I sent the uncoded transcripts from the first two interviews by email (except to Taneya who does not have access to a computer) to Faith and Jackie at least one week before the third (final) interview and asked them to read the transcripts before our final interview. At this final interview, both participants said that they had been too busy to read the transcripts. As a

result, I used the themes I had identified to begin the interviews. Although I did not send Taneya her interview transcripts, I conducted a follow-up interview with her as well. Three questions guided this interview:

1. Is there anything you'd like to add, delete, clarify, or elaborate on?
2. Did anything stand out to you from the transcripts? Did you learn anything about yourself from reading them?
3. There were several themes that stood out to me during my initial analysis. Can we talk about those?

After the co-analysis interviews, I created a list of themes I had used in the analysis interviews, added several additional themes based on existing literature, and fashioned a list of 14 themes that became sub-categories. For each sub-category, I created codes that were used for the second iteration of coding. As an example, the codes CHT, CHE, and CHR comprised the theme, or subcategory, CH. I then linked the subcategories to six categories extracted from the study's research questions. The subcategory CH fed into three of the six categories. A list of the categories, subcategories, and codes are included in Appendix E.

After the second round of coding using pre-determined codes, I completed another iteration of open, or exploratory, coding intentionally looking for outlying data, or data to which pre-determined codes and categories do not necessary apply. When I felt that the analysis was sufficient to address the research questions, I began to write my findings. Writing about complex qualitative data is an interpretive act, "lending shape and form—meaning—to mountains of raw data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 162). In narrative inquiry, researchers "analyze data for stories, 'restory-ing' stories, and develop themes" (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 175). Three questions guiding my analysis include the following:

1. What does this mean?
2. What does this tell me about the phenomenon under study?
3. What is really going on here? (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012, p. 172)

Additionally, my analyses include connections between patterns and themes, comparisons with other studies, considerations of alternative interpretations, and acknowledgement of ambiguities and inconsistencies. My goal in writing was to relate the social phenomena revealed through the data to theoretical constructs in a manner that provides answers to the research questions. Stated differently, I drew upon the study's findings to shed light on the two guiding research questions.

Researcher's Positionality

Qualitative researchers should be genuine and true to their social identities (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This project, whether by design or not I'm not quite sure, has connections to my lived experience as the daughter of a poor African-American woman. As a result, the political is personal, which is a characteristic of Black feminism: "Black women's commitment to the liberation of Blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experiences" Guy-Sheftall (1995, p. 2).

In many regards, the study's participants are not unlike my own mother. A mother of four, she birthed both my older brother and me before her nineteenth birthday. Though my mother was married twice during my childhood, I still describe her as a single mother. My characterization of her as a single mother is likely due to our family circumstances: my biological father's absence my whole life, my mother's unwed status when she had two of her four children, her single years between marriages, and my dependence on her alone for care and support whether a man was present or not.

My mother, who is often described as very smart, did not complete high school. I am not exactly sure when she quit school, but she likely left after becoming a mother at fifteen. Her lack of education/training combined with the absence of employment opportunities in Sumter County, Alabama resulted in a life of poverty for her and her children. While she never had a stable career, she did work several jobs during certain periods of my childhood. Before the sewing factories were shut down, she worked on the production line. In addition to her minimum wage pay at the sewing factory, she earned a bonus for each sewing bundle she completed. I recall her working other low-wage jobs as well—cashier at a convenience store and housekeeper for a White family. Even though she sometimes worked two jobs, she could never earn enough money to support us. During times of unemployment and underemployment, she depended on government assistance to support my siblings and me. In other words, I am the child of a welfare/food stamps/WIC/Medicaid mom. Because of the insight gained from this standpoint and based on previous findings, I expected, at the onset of the study, to find women who draw upon a network of kin for support, who find social services restrictive, who are aware of their low position on the social ladder, who find ingenious ways to provide their families' basic needs, and who want a better life for themselves and their children. Still, I was aware, and motivated by, the possibility that these ideas may be expanded and/or contradicted.

Though I was raised in an impoverished home, my college degrees and teaching career, for better or for worse, have distanced me from this world and from women like my mother. Because of the fluid and temporary nature of socioeconomic status, I have transitioned from being an insider to being an outsider to the world of the poor Black, single mother. Paradoxically, I see myself both as different than and similar to the story-givers in this study. As a result, I wavered between saying "us" and "them" or "we" or "they" throughout this writing.

Brown (2012) put forward her thoughts on the positionality: “Black feminist academics are positioned to use their social location to distinctively analyze race, class, and gender in various social settings” (p. 20). She acknowledged ways her identity as a Black woman played a major role in her success studying Black women legislators, one of which was the establishing of sister-to-sister relationships; being a racial and gendered insider created a level of comfort and allowed for sister-to-sister talk. A second way that her identity as a Black woman impacted her research was in the realization that race and gender influence other identities. For example, her participants felt comfortable discussing their faith because they assumed that she, too, was a Christian. She concluded that identity undoubtedly impacts “how the data is collected and what kinds of data are available to researchers” (Brown, 2012, p. 28). I found this shared identity useful in understanding some of the references made by participants, for example, when Faith mentioned a movie starring a cast of all African-American women, *Waiting to Exhale.* Just as Brown admitted the positive impact of her social identities in conducting her study, Alcoff (1991-1992) addressed a challenge: “a speaker’s location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech.” In the case of my project, my group membership in the group I’m studying (Black women) may lessen for some and strengthen for others the legitimacy of my claims. I have made my epistemological underpinnings and theoretical framework explicit in hopes of helping readers to understand the basis of my claims drawn from the data.

Ultimately, part of this work includes speaking on behalf of the research participants, crafting their life histories, giving shape to their maps. Hill Collins is convinced that Black women outside academia need experts (trained scholars) who are part of the group to express the

group's standpoint (Hill Collins, 1989). In "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Alcoff (1991-1992) offered a caveat to those of us who attempt the work, "Anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved" (p. 24) and suggest four practices to interrogate the practice of speaking for.

1. **The impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against** (Alcoff, 1991-1992, p. 24). Alcoff explicates that the desire to teach instead of to listen—to always be the speaker—is rooted in a desire for domination and mastery.
2. **We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in** (Alcoff, 1991-1992, p. 25). She explains that we should make transparent the relationship between our social location and our words (conclusions).
3. **Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says** (Alcoff, 1991-1992, p. 25). Alcoff teaches that a speaker (researcher) should be open and attentive to criticism.
4. **In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context** (Alcoff, 1991-1992, p. 26). She cautions that not only is the social location of the speaker important, but it is also important to attend to where the speech goes and what it does there. One must not only look at the content of claims but also consider the effects of he claims.

I attempted to employ each of these practices as I conducted the investigation at hand in the following ways:

1. As paradoxical as it may sound, I tried to allow my narratives to be evidence of my listening. To accomplish this goal, I included the speakers' words as much as is feasible. Additionally, I intend for my analysis to show that I have carefully listened.
2. Through writing reflexive memos, I paid attention to connections between the conclusions I drew, my theoretical framework, and my social location.
3. I will be open to criticism and will attend to it accordingly.
4. I have given serious consideration to my intended and unintended audience and was thoughtful and honest about the possible consequences of my claims.

I am certain, at least in my own eyes, that I occupy multiple locations. I am a Black woman. I am an academic. I acknowledge the personal subjectivity I hold because of my upbringing in the home of a poor, mostly single, African-American mother. Without a doubt, these early experiences shape how I view the world and the analytic lens through which I examine the data.

Chapter Five: Life History Narratives

The purpose of this study is to create a space that encourages the voice of African American women experiencing poverty by inviting them to teach those outside their world about their self-defined living conditions and their self-perceived position in the United States social hierarchy. The project's two areas of examination—the often stereotyped conditions and the precarious position of African American women experiencing poverty—are the foundation for the two overarching research questions and six more pointed subquestions.

1. To what extent do the self-defined lives of three African American single mothers experiencing poverty reflect and/or contradict two commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes about impoverished Black mothers?
    a. What are their living conditions?
    b. What lifestyles are they afforded?
    c. What are their everyday experiences?
    d. In what ways do they embody motherhood?
2. How do three African American single mothers in poverty perceive themselves?
    a. From their perspectives, where do they stand in the present day in relation to privilege, power, vulnerability, and oppression?
    b. In what ways do they think the position of impoverished Black women has changed over the last fifty years?

These two research questions are complementary; in sharing narratives about their living conditions, the participants also shed light on how they view their place in the social hierarchy, allowing for an examination of the harsh consequences of longstanding, oppressive structures.

As is characteristic of life history research, investigating the participants' individual lives provides insight into societal ideals such as justice and equity.

This chapter presents the participants' narrative fashioned from multiple qualitative data sources as detailed in Chapter 3. Each narrative addresses the topics posed in the research questions. Faith, Jackie, and Taneya can be described using the words Naylor (1983) used in the opening to *The women of Brewster place*: "Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story" (p. 5). I begin with Faith's story.

Faith's Narrative

Self-Described Living Conditions.

My life is hell right now, but I'm still here, and I'm still standing. I'm still going, and I still have a dream, and I still have drive." –October 7, 2015

Faith is a 49 year-old African-American single mother of four. She has three adult sons ages 29, 27, and 26 and one daughter, age 16. She has been married and divorced once. Her ex-husband is the father of her four children. Faith was unemployed and receiving government assistance in the form of food stamps and Medicaid at the beginning of the study. By the end, she had secured employment and was hoping to suspend her use of government assistance in the coming months. I met Faith several years ago when she was a student and I was faculty at a community college, though I was never her instructor. She and I have had a "virtual" friendship through social media since this time. I invited her and several other African-American women to "like" a page I created, and a private conversation between her and me ensued. Although she initially used words like "humiliated" and "ashamed" to describe how she felt about being invited to "like" the Beyond the Myths and Stereotypes: Black Women and Poverty community page on Facebook, at the last interview, her eagerness to participate was encapsulated in the statement, "I want to do some more."

She currently lives in a suburb of Dallas. Her town has approximately 50,000 residents, with 51.9% of the population being Black/African-American, compared with 11.8% in the state of Texas. According to 2014 U.S. Census data, almost 32% of the population hold bachelor's degrees, and the median household income is $67,299, notably higher than the Texas median of $51,900. The 8.9% poverty level is significantly lower than the state level of 17.6% (United States Census Bureau, 2015). As of November 2015, the unemployment rate for Dallas County is 4.1% (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Faith lives in a gated apartment community in a two-bedroom/two bathroom second story apartment with her fourth child, sixteen year-old Simone. Faith describes her physical home as an empty shell furnished with a bed, a couch, and bare necessities. Even though she views her apartment as an empty shell, I wrote in my field notes that it was "delightful" and "decorated nicely." (See figures 6-9.)

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Faith's description of her apartment is likely in comparison with the two-story home from which she had moved ten months prior, a home shared with a man she describes as a friend. "Empty" might also be a reflection of the lack that she's experiencing as she seeks to get re-established after leaving this last relationship with practically nothing. Emotionally, "it's full of love" between her and her daughter. Faith and Simone share a close relationship. Numerous photos around their home show them doing various activities together.

This recent move to her current apartment is the latest in a series of moves throughout Faith's life as a mother. Life has been "rough" for her and her children since she "walked away from [her] marriage" with three young sons sixteen years ago: "We moved a lot because I couldn't afford to stay at some places or another, so we moved a lot." Although people in the U.S. in general are highly mobile, race and income distinguish movers from non-movers. People of color move more than White people and people from low-income backgrounds are more likely to change residences, due in part to their renter status versus homeowner status (Crowley, 2003).

This high mobility rate is especially difficult for single mothers of school-aged children as moving residences likely results in their children having to change schools. She recounted Simone's recent transfer to her current high school as "dragging my child" from school to school. Even during her marriage, life was rough: "We were constantly getting put out or something because I just married somebody who just really didn't want to work." Faith had married her husband after an "ooops" pregnancy that happened just as she was entering her first year of college. It wasn't long after getting married that she got pregnant again with her second son, then a third. Although single mothers are more likely to experience poverty than married mothers, marriage alone does not eliminate poverty, as is evidenced by Faith's experiences. Roberts (1997) listed the belief that "marriage can end children's poverty" as a myth (p. 222). Rather, she argued, "children's poverty results from inadequate family income, due to the declining ability of one parent—especially the mother—to earn enough to stay above the poverty line" (Roberts, 1997, p. 223). Blow (2015) made a similar point: "Instead of endless efforts to sanctify marriage, the emphasis should be on finding ways to support children and encourage more parental engagement from both parents, regardless of marital status" (para 8).

Her last pregnancy, which she learned about after she had already asked her husband for a divorce, was "totally unexpected" after doctors had told her that she couldn't have more children because of uterine fibroids. In a study examining disparities in unwanted pregnancies in the U.S., Finer and Henshaw (2006) stated

> One in 20 American women has an unintended pregnancy each year, and the burden falls even more heavily on some groups: women aged 18-24, low-income women, cohabiting women and minority (particularly black) women. As a result of their high unintended

> pregnancy rates, women in these groups also have above-average rates of unintended birth and abortion. (p. 94)

Considering her ill-fated marriage and her existing three children, Faith almost had an abortion. "I was so close to aborting her. I was so close." But she had friends who promised to help her with her children, the new baby in particular. This was a year of depression—a "tough, tough year" full of uncertainties. Perhaps because of her ex-husband's failure to provide financially for their home while they were married, Faith completely expected to be her children's sole provider after their divorce: "I was stressing about how I am I going to take care of another baby." Her language here suggests that she saw this baby as well as her other children as *her* responsibility, not a shared one. Because caring for children is gendered work assigned to the mother, patriarchal societies like the U.S. expect women to be responsible for children—whether married or unmarried. Women like Faith are doubly burdened when their children's father do not fulfill their "manly" responsibility of providing financially for their children. As a result, single mothers with non-contributing fathers rely heavily upon themselves. Harris-Perry (2011) claimed that there is little empirical evidence that shows how this self-reliance affects black women's health but cited a 1995 study detailing social influences on people's physical and mental health. An important finding from the Detroit survey is that Black women lag behind both black men and whites in both emotional and physical well-being and reported being "less satisfied with their lives and physical health" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 201).

After her bitter divorce, forced to support herself and her children with one income from a "crummy" job, she lost everything. "I got evicted. Car got repossessed. I remember walking to the grocery store with my three sons in tow, and I'm pregnant, I would see my ex-husband driving by, and he would honk and wave. It made it worse." After the eviction, she found

another apartment, one-bedroom: "The kids had one bedroom, and I had the couch." At this time, she was working two jobs. "I couldn't let my babies starve." Again, she ascribed sole responsibility for her children to herself. She was stressing about finding adequate childcare for her new baby when an older lady who lived across the hall from her volunteered to watch baby Simone: "I tell you that lady was a blessing." The "blessing" of her neighbor's help is an example of what Hill Collins (2000) described as othermothering. Othermothers are women in the Black community who share mothering responsibilities with the biological mother (Hill Collins 2000). They have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Hill Collins, 2000). Through the years, Faith has relied upon othermothers, a network of friends for support in raising her children. "I've got some awesome friends." Omolade (1986), in recounting her experience as a single mother, mentioned that these "networks and the traditional kinship ties" are valued support systems for Black single mothers.

Faith described herself as a "bouncer" who is presently bouncing back from her last failed relationship with a man who was "pretty well-off." Unemployed because of an unexplained illness and unable to pay her bills, she took him up on his offer to move in with him. Faith defined him as her sole provider during this time. "I was totally dependent on him." She experienced no physical lack, but the relationship became emotionally exhausting because of his "fatal attraction" and "obsession" with her. Faith recalled him "blowing up" and "pushing her against the wall." The verbal and physical abuse led to her decision to move out of his home: "So I told him I'm moving out. I don't know where I'm going. I don't have any money at this point except what left in my 401K, which I ended up pulling out. I have no job, no money, no car." In her study of battered Black women, Davis (2012) found that Black women often use government assistance to recover from abusive relationships. Although Faith was able to receive

food stamps and Medicaid during this transition, she did not receive welfare or a housing supplement. After "bouncing" between friends' homes, overcome by feelings of guilt for the instability her daughter was experiencing, she was able to secure her present apartment after receiving her tax refund.

Her modest apartment is located in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, a quaint, welcoming community that is "a good place to live" despite its limited resources available to single mothers:

> I don't know if you're familiar with 211. They tell you to call 211 and tell them what your issue is, whether it's needing help with an electric bill or water or needing food or whatever it is, apartment rental assistance, you call 211. If you call 211 and give them your zip code for [name of town], they'll tell you that there are no resources for [name of town].

Oftentimes, Faith needs resources in addition to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, and Medicaid she receives. Thanks to the SNAP assistance she receives, she happily attests, "I have not been hungry." She's aware of other forms of government assistance and acknowledges her need for additional help. "I have no income. None. I can't get all the other benefits for some reason. I don't know." Faith's inability to receive welfare or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits might be related to time limits for receiving such assistance. Language on the Texas Workforce Commission website stresses the "temporary" nature of TANF benefits:

> New requirements under House Bill 1863 supported the use of public assistance as a temporary benefit. Under the bill, adult TANF recipients are subject to time-limited benefits as short as one year, for the most highly educated and job ready, followed by a five-year "freeze-out". Welfare Reform in Texas emphasized the importance of working,

> the temporary nature of public assistance and the belief that parents are responsible for the care and well-being of their families. (Texas Workforce Commission, 2015, para 4)

If Faith has received 60 months (five years) of TANF benefits over her 16 years as a single mother, she is ineligible to receive further welfare benefits. Having been a single mother since 1999, 1995 TANF restrictions would have applied to her. These limitations in Texas were established in anticipation of Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Numerous scholars (Zucchino, 1997; Edin & Lein, 1997; Dodson, 1999) have criticized Clinton's workfare, to which it is sometimes referred, because it unfairly punishes African American single mothers who are stereotyped as welfare queens who desire to take advantage of social services. Faith is no welfare queen. Her monthly expenses, from highest to lowest, are rent, cell phone, cable/internet, utilities (lights and water), and Simone's incidentals for school and school-related activities. Paying bills is always a juggling act, one which she manages fairly well. "I'm the queen of 'Extend this, extend that' especially now because it's just nothing coming in." In finding ingenuous ways to maintain her household, she has undoubtedly developed skills in negotiation and problem-solving. Yet, she doesn't always manage to fulfill her financial obligations. Appearing visibly shaken, she expressed the angst she experiences when she's not able to pay her rent on time.

> It might get paid late, which makes me feel horrible. I have a thing about getting papers on my door. It freaks me out. It makes me feel some kind of way[5] for them to put a notice on my door about the rent is late. On the 4th, if I have that notice on my door, it just unnerves me for the rest of the week because usually I'm in stress mode, "How am I

[5] To feel "some kind or type of way" is to hold uneasy, unsettled, mixed, or unclear feelings that are intense and difficult to articulate or express, hence the phrase, "some kind of way". It is typically used by African American women.

> going to make this happen?" Now there's more money to pay because I'm late. Then it's gonna go up and up and up. So that just rattles me to the core.

In Dallas, a city in which poverty is rising, and the median income is declining, finding affordable housing is problematic (Wilonsky, 2016). In addition to her struggle to pay rent, she is not always able to pay utility bills: "We have had the lights out for a minute. We have had the . . . what else was off? The cable, the internet, and all that stuff off for a minute." The stress of not being able to pay bills appears to be a constant. She recollects a time that she reached out to a local church to help her through a stressful period brought about because of financial strain. "One day I just went to a couple of churches. One, I just wanted somebody I didn't know to pray with me, and two, I asked about resources, and they welcomed me with open arms." Not only was she seeking material help but spiritual help to deal with the stress as well. This outcry for help indicates that her financial struggles affect her spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

Ironically, the act of reaching out for assistance itself can be a source of stress and shame. With teary eyes, she shares

> It's quite a humiliating experience to have to go in there and hand in a form. I start crying when I'm driving to the place just because to me, it's a degrading feeling. I don't want to be here. I don't want to have to do this. I don't want you to look at me and think, "Here comes another one" because to me that's the attitude they present to you as soon as you walk in—like you wanna do this and you're gonna try to take advantage of the system. You're gonna be on this for the next five years. It's a trial every single time. It is a test. And I fail it every time. I walk in there and I cry, I'm crying as I go in. And for once I'd like for somebody to say, "Are you ok?" I'm not gonna tell you my life story,

> but can you ask me instead of . . . . "What is it this time? Here comes another one." That's what it feels like.

The constant stress that Faith is under is linked to shame and has adverse effects on her health. Harris-Perry's (2011) breakdown of shame is worth mentioning again here. As stated earlier she described stigmatizing shame as insidious, designed to label individuals as outcasts. "Shame makes us view our very selves as malignant" (2011, p. 109). Chronic shame causes individuals to blame themselves for their circumstances. Former Florida Governor and recent presidential hopeful Jeb Bush advocated for a return to the shame experienced by single mothers in a chapter in his book called, "[6]The Restoration of Shame":

> One of the reasons young women are giving birth out of wedlock . . . . is that there is no longer a stigma attached to this behavior, no reason to feel shame . . . . Their parents and neighbors have become ineffective at attaching some sense of ridicule to this behavior. There was a time when neighbors and communities would frown on out of wedlock births and when public condemnation was enough of a stimulus for one to be careful. (Bassett, 2015, para 3)

Associating motherhood with shame is problematic not only because of the way it universally forces socially constructed morality on women but also because of the harmful effects of shame. Feelings of shame leads to chronically increased cortisol levels, which is linked to weight gain, heart disease, hardening of the arteries, and decreased immune function (Harris-Perry, 2011). In our informal talk before starting an interview, she connected the challenge to lower her chronic high blood pressure to chronic stress. During a subsequent interview, I asked her to tell me more about her health.

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[6] In 2015, Bush said that his views about public humiliation of single mothers and fathers have evolved.

> Overall, I feel like I'm in good health, but this blood pressure issue has been ongoing for years. I think I was diagnosed with it in 2005. Not bad, wasn't put on medication. Then maybe in 2007, it was getting worse, so they put me on meds, and I believe I went through doctor after doctor and med after med after med until it was up to about 12 different medications in a 3 month period because nothing was regulating the blood pressure. I changed my diet, I started to exercise. Still fighting hypertension.

Her current blood pressure medicine dosage exceeds the amount recommended for her petite body and causes her to feel lightheaded and dizzy but is needed to keep her blood pressure in a normal range. In spite of these conditions, she says that she fights, "To smile. To find peace in spite of."

Faith defines herself as a "simple person." "I don't require a lot. I don't need a lot. I'm pretty basic. Doesn't take much to make me happy." Her life is far from luxurious as exemplified by her idea of splurging.

> When I splurge for Faith, it means going to Starbucks and having a cup of coffee. It means treating myself to lunch. It might mean getting my toes done. When I tell you that's far and few between, that's far and few between. I've learned to buy coffee and make it. And I've learned—I'll never master doing my toes, but I try—It looks like a five year-old did 'em, but I try.

Additionally, she makes her own body care products as an alternative to expensive brands. "I go to buy Carol's Daughter, it was way too expensive for me. Lush, I can just go in that store in live in Lush, but those products are too high, so I just started experimenting." This experimenting has resulted in the creation of inexpensive personal care products that she and Simone use. Again, we see ingenuity at work in her life. Faith desires nice things but realizes

her financial limitations. As a result, she has cultivated her talents, as is exemplified by this self-description from her identity board (See figure 10):

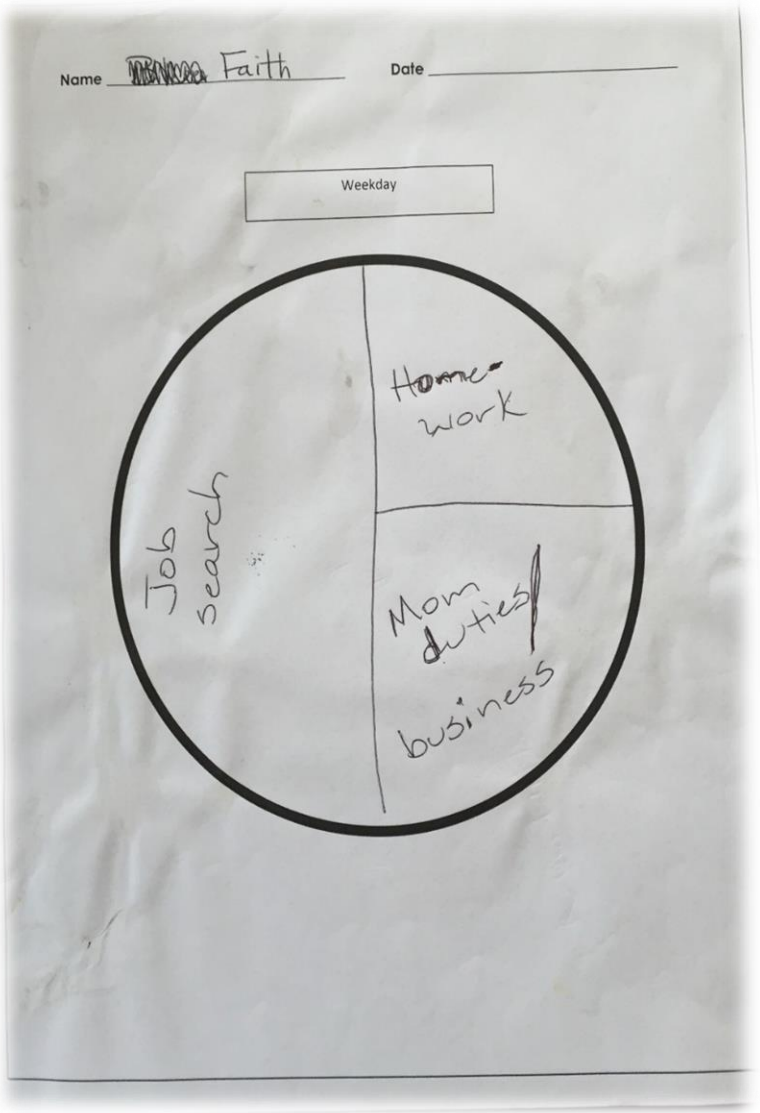
> "Interior design on a dime." Because although it's not reflected in here [her apartment] yet, I can do the doggone thing when it comes to decorating, and I can do it on a budget. I'm a thrift store, bargain shopper, and I can turn it around.

Figure 10.

At the beginning of the study, Faith was unemployed and actively seeking employment. She feels that "a job and a positive attitude," are necessary for her to be in a different place a year from now, adding that she believes that her goals are entirely possible. At my request, she created a pie chart divided into parts to communicate how she spends her days. The chart show that fifty percent of her time is spent on the job search. (See figure 11.) Her desperate need of employment is also the major reason she maintains the "luxury" of an operating cell phone. "Most of my time is spent looking for a job, whether it is online or going to the library, or going

to Texas Workforce Commission, or going door to door trying to handout out my resume. That's my major focus right now."

Figure 11.



Although she is in dire need of employment and the subsequent income, she is selective in the kind of job she wants.

> It's just time for me to do what Faith wants to do and figure out exactly what I want to do when it comes to a career. I still really don't know. I just know that I want it to be

> feeling [an emotional connection to her work]. I don't want to go just because I need a check.

I concluded that Faith desires work that not only sustains her physically but emotionally as well. This selectivity became apparent when she refused a job offer. She told me by text message, "Friday before I left for my retreat, the daycare called and told me to come in tomorrow. Altheria, it's not where I'm supposed to be. As bad as I need a job, I don't want to be stagnant or dread showing up everyday [sic]." She refused the daycare's offer. I did not find Faith's refusal to accept this job, given her dire circumstances, shocking. Throughout my time with her, she, at almost 50 years of age, emphasized the need to do work that feeds her spirit.

She divided the other half of the pie chart into two sections: homework and mom duties/business. Faith is an online student at the University of Phoenix but has no drive and passion for her academic studies as is evidenced by the little effort she puts into her homework.

> I just procrastinate. I'm really not feeling it. And there are days where I just feel what am I doing in school at this point in time, and I think I'm doing it, not so much because I want to really work in that field that I'm pursuing, but because I've always just wanted to get a degree.

Faith values education and has tried several times to complete her college degree. She sees a connection between work and college, but the relationship is a complicated one. College adds unneeded stress, especially because she feels guilty about spending time doing academics when she might be benefited more greatly by focusing on her job search, which is her most pressing need at the moment. "I look at it as, "Maybe if you go ahead and get this (college education), it might help with that (job) . . . later, like when I finish. But here I see so many college grads that can't find a decent job, so I get deterred by that." Her less-than-enthusiastic enrollment at The

University of Phoenix, a for-profit institution, might be a direct result of targeting. Huelsman (2015) examined the relationship between for-profit institution and students of color in "Betrayers of the dream: How sleazy for-profit colleges disproportionately targeted black students." For-profit institutions' ads are ubiquitous in communities of color and other places where black and brown people congregate (Huselman, 2015). Huelsman contended that these institutions target students who are likely to qualify for government grants and loans:

> A 2012 Senate investigation revealed many for-profit recruiting practices that were little more than racial dog whistles. One presentation for recruiters at Vatterott College, a St. Louis–area for-profit, advised recruiters to target the "welfare mom with kids" and "pregnant ladies," as well as those with records of "recent incarceration" and "drug rehabilitation." Other colleges had recruiters drop off information at Section 8 housing and unemployment offices, where high numbers of potential low-income and minority students could be found. (para 6)

Only about one in five black students complete a degree at a for-profit university, which is twice the dropout rate of public and private nonprofit four year programs, and 65% of black borrowers drop-out before completing their degrees (Huelsman, 2015). Student loan debt could worsen Faith's economic instability. Still, a college education is a priority for her. "That's just a personal mission to say, for my kids to say my mom graduated from college, and I think it's more for them than for me. I just want them to be able to say, 'My mom is a college grad.'" Obviously, Faith sees a college education as an indicator of success. She is mostly convinced that a college education is one way to ensure career success and economic stability; as a result, for Simone, "college is not an option."

My first interview with Faith was in early October. By late November, Faith revealed to me the news that she had found a job. In fact, she texted me a photo of the congratulatory email she received from the company that hired her. In our third interview, she detailed

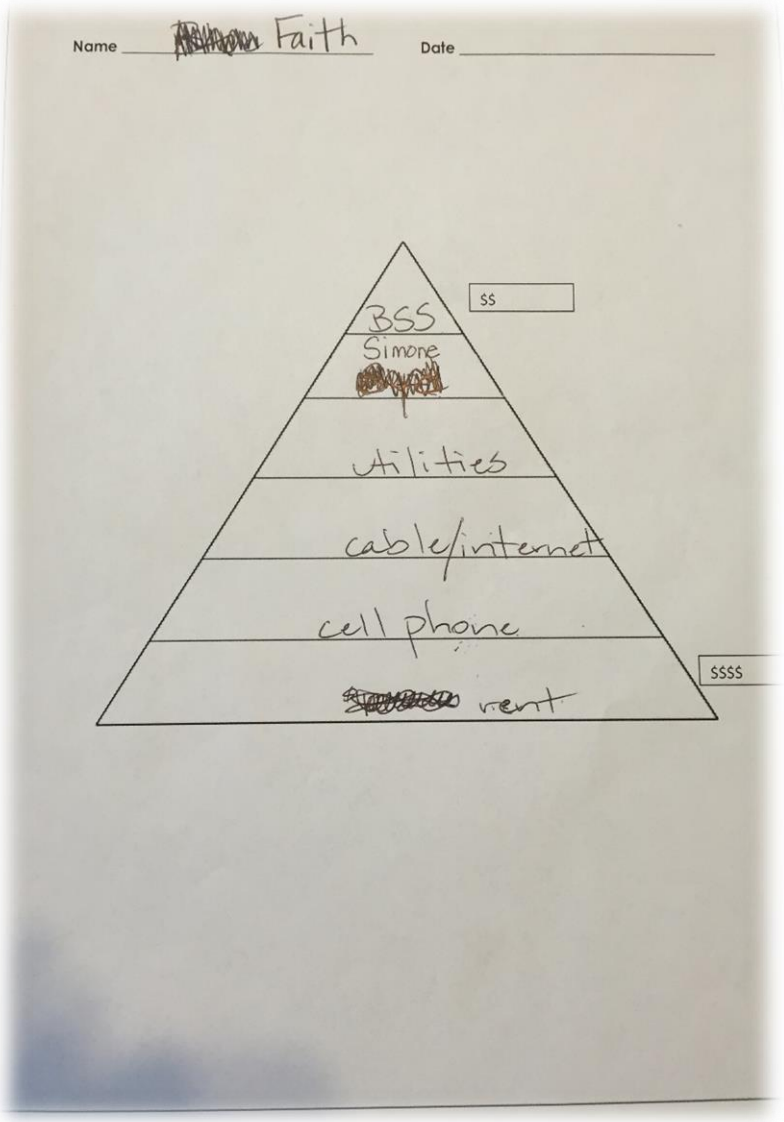
> I will be working in intervention radiology half the day, not even half the day, about three hours of the day. I'll be working as a receptionist greeting patients and whatever they need me to do up there. Second half of the day I get to do the good stuff, the clinical part where I get to the OR (operating room) and I assist with little minor cases related to surgery.

This job, though still considered low-wage work, is a full-time position doing work she enjoys and that allows her to work during the hours that Simone is in school. "I did not want a second shift. I did not want to be away from my daughter." She describes the elation she felt when she was offered the job: "I have been high ever since I got that call . . . . I don't think I've ever been so happy to pee in a cup!" The modest hourly pay exceeds her salary at previous positions. "I don't normally make $15 an hour. I normally make $10 or $12." In fact, she is perhaps falsely optimistic about the freedom she will be afforded as a result of her new job. She proudly exclaimed between claps, "I'm back! Baby I'm back! I'm back!" Yet, the living wage for an adult and child in Texas is $21.06 an hour, 25% more than her salary.

The last fourth of her pie chart indicates that the rest of her time is spent with mom duties and her business. Since her first three children are adults, Faith's mom duties surround vibrant, smart Simone. Her mom duties with Simone range from teaching her to drive to helping her write college admission essays. If she had extra money, she would spend more "girl time" with Simone. "That'll be the time I say to her, "Let me take you and get your toes done, your nails and feet done, and I'll just sit there. Or let me take you to lunch somewhere different—to

Sprinkles [a cupcake store] because she loves Sprinkles. So usually it's her. Let's go see that movie you've been wanting to see." Faith's splurge fantasy is one testament to her priorities. Simone's wellbeing is of utmost importance to her, so important, in fact, that Faith included a section on her expenses pyramid for Simone's expenses. (See figure 12.)

Figure 12.



Faith takes her mom duties seriously, a point that will be expounded upon in an analysis of her views on motherhood.

> It's been very important to me since I had my first son to be present, to not miss a beat . . . . And even now with the last one, I can see where I'm tired. I'm tired. I'm tired of ripping and running to different stuff. I really am. I've been doing this for thirty years, and I'm tired, so I try to be mindful that she deserves the same attention that they got, but it's harder now just because I'm tired of going to all this stuff.

Last, Faith spends the remainder of her day creating products for her business, which I will abbreviate BSS. Through BSS, she makes and sells hair and body care products from natural ingredients. Faith narrates the birth of her business.

> [It] is something that started as just little personal gifts to give to Simone's teachers for whatever day it was—Teacher Appreciation Day, Christmas, whatever, and then I started giving them to my friends for Christmas and birthdays. The feedback I got was so good so I thought, "Well maybe I can go somewhere with this."

She was able to get her small business off the ground while involved with the "well-off" man in her previous relationship. Faith describes the revenue from her business as steady. She sells her products through her friends, family, and social network but feels torn about the time and money she invests in her business. (See figure 13 for a photo of product display.) "I try to put some time aside for my business, not as much as I should, because that gets discouraging, too. I always say, "It takes money to make money." Though Faith's entrepreneurial work conflicts with many people's image of poverty, it is not surprising to some of us that single mothers have creative ways to earn unreported money (Edin and Lein, 1997).

Figure 13.

Faith's primary mothering responsibilities at this point in her life are to her daughter Simone, a junior in high school and an honor student; as a result, most of her narrative focuses only on her current experiences with her daughter. Simone cheers on her high schools cheer squad and runs for the track team. Following in her mother's entrepreneurial footsteps, to earn extra money, Simone styles her friends' and classmates' hair. She had a client come for an appointment during one of my visits to their home. The challenges she presents to her mom are similar to ones presented by many teenagers—exceeding the limits on her cell phone plan and

keeping her bedroom and adjoining bathroom less than tidy. When I asked Faith if I could use the bathroom, she directed me to her bathroom, which was farther away from where we were seated in the kitchen. "I wouldn't dare send you to Simone's bathroom," suggesting that it was unclean. Faith characterizes Simone as "the light of [her] life" and her "main source of inspiration." During our first meeting, I provided Faith with materials to create an identity board (See figure 10.) that would reveal who she is, from her perspective. When asked to tell me about the identity board, she began

> "I have a purpose," I saw this quote that says, "I didn't want to wake up one day and discover that I hadn't done what I was put on this planet to do." So I believe that my main purpose is to be a mom. That was it. And I believe I've served it well. And it was such a joy, and it still is, especially with this baby girl. It's a joy just bonding with her, talking to her, and being silly with her, and being serious with her, just doing all those things I never got to do with my mother. It's the best gift I could have ever been blessed with. And it even says here, "Being a mom gives me strength." Because they inspire me. They push me to be my best self.

Without a doubt, motherhood is central to Faith's identity, and she enacts this role guided by her hopes and fears and for her children. With strong conviction, she admits, "I can't imagine my life without being a mom, I cannot, I cannot, and not only to mine but others." It is significant to note here that although Faith has always struggled financially as a mother, she engages in othermothering—mothering children who are members of her village. In this way, she demonstrates the important role motherhood plays in the life of some African American women. When asked who sits at the center of her life, she lists God, then her children. Her commitment to her children goes back to the birth of her first son, with whom she stayed home and cared for

while her husband attended college. Her commitment today is evidenced by her presence at her daughter's pep rallies and track meets. She concludes, "If it's important to her, it's important to me. Plus, it just matters that I didn't have it. I just didn't have it, so I want her to have it." Her own voids serve as strong motivation for her insistence on being there.

In his examination of what it means to be a good mother, Gosa (2012) contended, "The hegemonic model of motherhood dictates that women complete their education, enter into a heterosexual marital relationship, and then plan for motherhood" (p. 17). In Hip-Hop culture, however, an alternative mothering discourse is espoused, a discourse that affords the "good mother" signature to urban-poor-single mothers who can be good mothers in ways that do not require middle class resources. Faith's unfailing love for her children is an example of the "good mother" characterization found in Rap/Hip-Hop music. Chaney and Brown's (2015) examination of R&B and Hip-Hop lyrics also found descriptions of motherhood that refute the hegemonic model. For example, Tupac's "Dear Mama" lyrics could be fitting for Faith: "When I was sick as a little kid/To keep me happy there's no limit to the things you did/And all my childhood memories/Are full of all the sweet things you did for me." For Faith, motherhood involves extreme sacrifice. As an example, she proclaimed that she "would take a bullet for her. I really would. That's what I think a mama should do. I wouldn't only do it for her, I'd do it for any of my kids." According to Faith, sacrifice is a manifestation of love. When I asked Faith what happens to kids who don't receive love from their parents, her response was jolting. "They end up like me—hurting all their lives. Hurting their entire lives. And I don't think there's enough counseling in the world that could take away that lack of feeling loved by your parent." As a result, Faith is intent on her children not carrying the same voids.

Additionally, she sees preparing her children for the future as a primary responsibility of mothering. For example, she asked me if I'd be willing to help Simone with her college admission and scholarship essays, tasks she performed for her sons when they were at this stage years ago. She counts among the highest points in her life her youngest son's college graduation. "That's a high. There is no feeling like it. There is no feeling like it . . . . the whole trip was emotional—from the time I hit Nebraska to the time he walked across the stage." She has big dreams for her children, "bigger than they have for themselves." An apt example of her role as a guide occurred when she perceived Simone's speech start to change after transferring from a majority White high school to a majority Black high school. "No, no, I'm not having it. I've had to work too hard at keeping you . . . You say you want to go to Howard I need you to get back on par." While she sees herself as a guide and teacher, she realizes that she can't always protect them. "I have to let them go through some things, bump their head."

Through the years, she has invited her children's father to share in their children's lives as a co-parent. When her youngest son was playing college football, she did not reject her husband's sudden presence in her son's life.

> Dad used to play football, professionally, just for a brief stint in the NFL, so that was his dream to have his boys, somebody, and he just knew that this would be the one. He got a scholarship to a division I school and he just knew that this was my pro ball player right here. So Dad was glued to his hip.

His active participation was short-lived, however. Her children's father disappeared from their lives again after her son suffered a career-ending football injury. Just recently, after Simone indicated that she would like to have her father in her life, Faith encouraged him to become more active in Simone's life. After he refused her invitation, she left him with a caveat, "Ok, don't try

to step in when some big, important event pops up. Don't try to step in. Don't have your feelings hurt when she gets married and she doesn't ask you to walk her down the aisle." This attempt to coax her daughter's father to be involved in her life shows that Faith values what he could add to Simone's life. Having had a close relationship with her father, Faith is keenly aware of what Simone is missing.

Ultimately, her embodiment of motherhood is directly related to the ways she was mothered. "How I am as a mother has come about as a result of how she [her mother] was as a mother . . . . how she interacted with me . . . . That caused me to take motherhood by the horns and ride with it." Faith desires healthy relationships with her children above all else. When sharing her dreams for Simone, she included the following painful story.

> I want her to have a great relationship with her kids. Out of everything, I think this is the most important thing because I didn't have it. I didn't have it with my mother, so I try to overcompensate with my daughter, and I'm very honest with her and saying, 'I don't like my mother. I tolerate my mother.' And I feel awful about doing that, but that's what it is.

Faith became estranged from her mother after she was raped by her mother's boyfriend at age 14. She recalled this horrifying experience:

> One day while she (Faith's mothers) was at work, I come home, I had to come right home from school, no exceptions, no nothing. I come home from school, and he was there. He had had surgery a couple of weeks before, and he was still off, and he comes to my room with a knife and says, "Take off your clothes. Take off all of your clothes or I'll cut you." I'm 14. I did it. And he had his way with me.

Her mother did not believe Faith's accusations and went on to marry Faith's rapist. Faith recalls her mom's painful characterizations, "You're a liar. You're a liar. You're a whore and you're a liar." Understandably, Faith still resents her mother and awaits an apology. "That's all I want is 'I'm sorry,' instead of it being hush-hush and taboo and we can never talk about it." Her childhood voids continue to be unfilled. "I still find it in my heart to say I want my mama. I just need to accept the fact, 'You'll never get what you need from her.'"

Motherhood responsibilities are so important to Faith that she likens it to retiring from paid work. As she imagines her life after Simone graduates from high school next year, she anticipates the difficulty that she may face. "I've been doing it for 30 years. So now what? It's almost like retiring, and figuring out, 'now what do I do with my life?'" Faith admitted, "I have even considered adopting after Simon leaves." Considering her current and past struggles with raising her children as a single mother, one might wonder why she would consider adopting. Hill Collins (1991) asserted that motherhood can be a source of self-actualization for Black women. A similar thought is expressed by Wallace (2015) as well:

> There is little in the black community to reinforce a young black woman who does not have a man or a child and who wishes to pursue a career. She is still considered against nature. It is extremely difficult to assert oneself when there remains some question of one's basic identity" (p. 172-173).

Evidently, motherhood is central to Faith's identity and fulfillment as a woman.

Self-Perceived Social Status.

> *"I want them to know that I hurt, too. I break, too. I bend. I have it hard, that I'm not perfect."—October 7, 2015*

"Africa. I think my name would be Africa," Faith replied when asked to rename herself a place. "When I think of Africa, I think of beauty and wealth, and I'm not talking about money.

I'm talking about heart and soul and spirit. I just see beauty, and it just makes me feel like royalty." This characterization of herself reveals either that she sees herself as majestic or that she dreams herself to be royal, adorned in regal beauty. Paradoxically, most of her self-descriptions did not involve such regality.

It is interesting to note that multiple times in speaking about aspects of herself, she used the word "little": "little spirit," "little business," "little petite woman," "little soul," "little vibe," little woman", "little old lady," "little creative spirit," and "little soul." Little is a relative size-term that only draws meaning in comparison to something or someone else. Her repeated use of "little" might suggest that she sees herself small or minor as compared to others. Further, it seems that Faith's use of government assistance influences the ways she views herself and the ways she fears others view her. "I want them to see me as more than a number because to me, it's quite a humiliating experience to have to go in there and hand in a form." This position as a recipient undoubtedly causes her to see herself as a dependent who is vulnerable to powerful social services system. She continues to define herself in terms that suggest her social status and her vulnerability. "I'm sincerely broke . . . I'm struggling."

Her sheer delight at the possibility of moving from a position as recipient to a giver is evidenced by her desire to go to the Department of Health and Human Services to thank them for their assistance by giving them candy or cookies. She describes a moment in the future when she can say to a social services worker "Thank you but no thank you." Faith's eagerness to become a giver as opposed to a recipient indicates that she realizes the low status granted to those who receive help from the government. In a highly introspective way, Faith acknowledges the present conditions of her life.

> While my bank account, meager surroundings, EBT and Medicaid cards provide me with the realities of my life, they do not determine my value. I no longer choose to let 'lack' define me as I have done for years, because it's true . . . . this too shall pass.

Though she does not connect her conditions with her social position here, in another response, she makes evident her belief about social status. She believes that the most privileged people are Caucasians and those who are wealthy of any race. "The ones at the bottom [of the social ladder] are those who are uneducated, impoverished, and unmotivated." Possessing neither whiteness nor wealth, she obviously sees herself at the bottom of the ladder. An exchange that started with the question, "Who are you?" invoked a response from Faith that illuminates how she perceives herself. Faith appears to embrace the race and class labels while also realizing the limitations of these characterizations.

> Me: "Who are you? I ask that because I define you in the study as single mother, has school-aged child, use government assistance, you're African-American or Black, how accurate are those descriptions? Who would you say you are?"
>
> Faith: Those descriptions are accurate, but I would say that I'm much more than that.

Faith's response about those at the bottom of the social ladder being those who are poor and uneducated suggests that she sees herself among them. Though she knows that this is her social position, she does not allow this position to destroy her esteem. She realizes that she is much more than this position. Faith was shocked that the percentage (25%) of Black women in poverty is not higher: "I'm surprised that Black and Latino are that low." This comment indicates her awareness of mainstream discourse surrounding women of color and poverty. However, her response about why the percentage of Black women in poverty is so high, shows that she has also been persuaded that the reasons for disproportionate poverty among African-

American women is due to cultural deficits—a failure to marry and pass on middle-class values. She sees her predicament as a result of personal failures not external forces: "I have failed on numerous occasions . . . . much of this happened as a result of choices I had made. I believe in accountability."

Faith has lived in four states: Louisiana, California, Nevada, and Texas. She comments that the worst state in terms of opportunities for Black women is Nevada, as "there are a lot of Black women who worked as maids. I mean, that was it. They were maids." (She lived in Las Vegas almost thirty years ago.) Compared to the other states where she has lived, she ranks Texas first in opportunities for Black women and links opportunity with education. When asked about how her mother's life was different from hers when her mother was 49, she did not acknowledge the role of context (Her mother is in her 70's). Instead, she described her mom as a highly successful career woman without regard to any constraints or limitations she may have faced as result of different socio-political climate. Yet, a response to another question evidences her awareness of the gradual increase in opportunities for Black women over the last several decades.

> I think the status of black women in the U.S. has improved over the last 50 years. Contrary to popular belief, we are afforded many opportunities that allow us to progress and/or advance. I see many of us going after Doctoral degrees, starting businesses, climbing the corporate ladder, and mastering mothering. Many more of us realize our worth and have maximized opened doors, and sometimes, kicked closed doors down. Heck yeah, the status of black women has improved.

When I showed Faith a graphic indicating that 25.1% of Black women live in poverty contrasted with 10.3% of Caucasian women and asked her why she thinks this is the case, she readily attributed the differences to cultural deficits within African American families.

> A lot of times, they (Caucasian and Asian families) are from that two parent home. Mom and Dad have that college education and stable home and all that comes with it, and that's what they go and do. That's what they're taught to do. We . . . we don't do that so much. We come from a single parent home, and then we become a single parent home, and our kids become a single parent home because that's what they saw, and as a result . . . we replicate what we see.

In this way, then, Faith attributed Black women's low economic status on their failure to form two-parent families, mirroring Moynihan's assertion that Black families are deviant because of single mother-led households. Faith believes that many doors have opened for Black women over the last fifty years. Based on the value she places on a college education, I infer that she sees a college degree as a path to overcoming barriers before Black women.

While Faith's adult life has been plagued by struggle, she remains optimistic that a change in her status is imminent. She desires to live a life of self-sufficiency and do work to which she feels connected. With Simone graduating from high school next year and going to college, Faith will shift into another phase of her life. She is both nervous and excited about what the future holds.

Jackie's Narrative

Self-Described Living Conditions.

"Internally, I always feel like I'm at the edge of the earth when we believed it was flat . . . I've realized that the earth is round and that I'm not going to fall over."—December 1, 2015

Jackie is a 33 year-old African-American mother of four. She has three daughters ages 13, 11, and 9 and one son, age 7. She has been married and divorced twice and has two children from each marriage. Jackie is employed full-time and receives government assistance in the form of food stamps and Medicaid. Jackie contacted me after reading an article I wrote for the blog, *For Harriet*. She was eager to participate in the study, as indicated by the concluding sentence in her initial email: "I'd love to talk with you more about my perspective."

She currently lives in Pitt County, North Carolina, close to the North Carolina coast. The area is home to East Carolina University. According to 2014 census estimates, the population in her town is almost 90,000, with 37% of the population being Black/African-American, compared with 21.5% in the state of North Carolina. Almost 37.1% of the population hold bachelor's degrees, and the median household income is $35,137, markedly lower than the North Carolina median of $46,334. The 30% poverty level is significantly higher than the state level of 17.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2015). As of November 2015, the unemployment rate for Pitt County is 5.7% (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Her home is a two-story, four-bedroom house that is inhabited by Jackie and her four children. (See figure 14.) When describing her living conditions, Jackie labeled her neighborhood as "upscale"—a diverse community of single family houses with "tons of kids". She proudly mentioned that the sheriff is one of her neighbors. In an attempt to establish the normalcy of her home, she explained, "My house is not chaotic. We have bills. I go to work, my kids go to school. That's typical people." In fact, I wrote in my field notes on 10/22, the first day that I met her, "She showed me a two-story, brick house in a nice community, a house that looks far better than my own." Jackie designates the part of town where her son gets his hair cut as the hood. "I definitely do not live in the hood at all." She tells me about a major street in

her town that “separates haves from the have-nots,” specifying that she lives on the “haves” side. When she moved from another city to the current one, her selection of a nice neighborhood was an intentional decision. “That’s what I wanted—two car garage, fenced in, four-bedroom, that’s what I was looking for.” This preference was mainly due to her desire for a safe, secure community in which to raise her children. “I wanted them to be comfortable. I knew I was gonna have my hands full when I got here, and I didn’t want that extra [burden] of being concerned about where they were, who was there, can they be outside, that kind of thing.” I thought that maybe I had selected a participant that didn’t meet the criteria, but when I checked her information form, I saw that she wrote that she receives government assistance. I would come to realize that Jackie’s life is characterized by contradictions.

Figure 14.

In addition to her house and neighborhood contradictions, Jackie's career refutes my perception of a single mother who uses government assistance. Jackie was recently promoted within her company to "a human resource advisor" for a gasoline and convenient store chain. She works a full-time salaried job that requires travel and offers her perks. In her area, Friday night football at the university is a major function. On the evening of our first interview, she mentioned that she had gotten free tickets through her job and had given them away. Worried that she had given them away because of our interview, I apologized that she was not able to go. She relieved my concerns by admitting, "I get them all the time."

Jackie admitted that her seeming middle-class status is only a façade. "We're just faking it. We don't have it. We just make it look like." Ironically, this "faking it" became apparent on the second day of my research with Jackie. A passage from my field notes evidences Jackie's precarious conditions.

> I was excited about visiting Jackie at her home and meeting her children. The plans were for me to come over after she got off work and observe her while she braided her girls' hair. Instead, I received a text message from her around 1 pm saying that she and the kids had been locked out of their home. Although they were not evicted, the landlord had barred them from entry by putting locks on the doors because of overdue rent. She was optimistic that they'd be back in their home within a few hours, and she'd let me know what time to come over.

Jackie and I texted throughout the afternoon and into the evening. Though getting back into her house was taking longer than she expected, she still believed that she would get back in at some point that evening. Jackie picked up a pizza for her children, and they came to my hotel where we hung-out in the lobby for a few hours. She was distressed, and her heaviness showed in her

eyes. The jovial, upbeat Jackie whom I had met the day before was now solemn and distracted. Over two-thousand dollars behind in rent, Jackie had made payment arrangements with her landlord, but he was "obviously tired of waiting." During this informal interview/observation, Jackie distracted herself from her current situation by showing me Instagram photos of natural hairstyles she had done on her hair (hair and make-up are two of her interests). Paradoxically, she also showed me photos from a recent family vacation which depicted an eight-bedroom beautiful condominium on the beach where she, her children, and members of her extended family had stayed just a few short months prior.

When Jackie left the hotel with her children, she carried the anxiety surrounding her temporary homelessness with her. Anxiety and strain, though not to this extent, are constant psychological conditions for her. She described her living conditions are "more psychological than people understand." This burden is brought on by her efforts to maintain a household, maintain a family, maintain a personal life, and maintain a job. As a mother of four, Jackie sees herself as "one source of pull." She went on, "It's just the solo aspect of being the one adult responsible." Jackie is burdened by a great sense of responsibility. "I don't blame anyone else for my situation. It's probably one of my downfalls. I don't make anybody else responsible." In the past, Jackie's forced self-reliance due to the absence of her children's fathers has had several mental and emotional consequences. She narrates the lowest point in her life:

> Being 25 years of age with four kids, separated from his dad, not making enough money, using all those things [social services] that I just told you about, and going to all those places, trying to figure out whether I was going to make it or not. I considered suicide a couple of times just because I didn't know. I didn't see a way. I didn't have any hope.

This was a "black, very black time." She recounts a gloomy internal dialogue, "This is going to kill me, this is going to kill me, this is going to kill me, this is going to kill me." Jackie's stressors are numerous. Stressors such as housing, food insecurity, worries about work, and stigma tend to be chronic, severe, and long term for single mothers (Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012). For low-income single mothers, who are more vulnerable than their married counterparts, the physical effects of chronic, long-term stress range from diabetes and hypertension to a weakened immune system and joint pain (Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012). This stress is evidenced as she described her ever-present psychological strain using a profound simile:

> Internally I always feel like I'm at the edge of the earth when we believed it was flat, but I've learned to deal with that. I know that I'm not at the edge of the earth. I've realized that the earth is round and that I'm not going to fall over. But it does always feel like it is the end or the big one. It always feels like that, but I think I've just learned how to deal with it. I think I alluded to this somewhat in the interview, but it's almost like the more it doesn't kill me, the more confident about the fact that nothing will. But the pressure is still there.

Jackie has developed resilience as a result of this chronic strain. In fact, her past experiences have proven to her that regardless of what she faces, she will survive. In reference to her recent lock-out, she apprised, "I'm not going to say it didn't bother me because that sounds callous, but I know that this is not going to kill me. I have been worse off." Though I knew she was facing tremendously strain, her tired eyes and absent smile were the only signs of emotional distress. She was trying to be strong for herself and her children. Black (2010) found that for the Black women in her study, being strong meant relying on self, concealing emotional distress, and

sacrificing personal needs. The consequences of being "strong" are emotional eating, reduced help seeking, and anxiety and depression. As will be discussed later, Jackie's chronic strain has consequences which she recognizes.

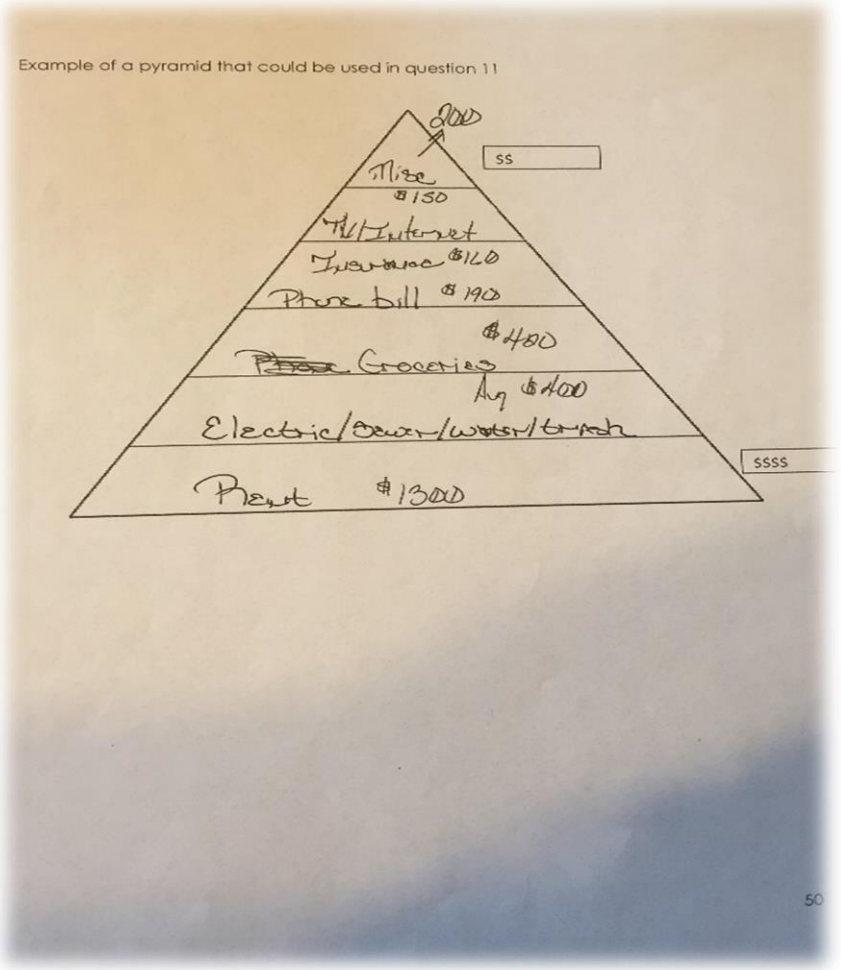
Jackie's constant financial struggles suggest, among other things, that she is living beyond her means. She lives in nice four-bedroom home, her children have tablets and cell phones, she and her children take vacations, and her children are involved in extracurricular activities. Jackie completed a chart to indicate her household expenses, with the major expense being her $1,300 rent, which she says is difficult to cover. "The minute I got money, I got a $1,300 house. My rent before this was $775. So I doubled my rent." Jackie's rent for one year is $15,600. While I am not certain what percentage of her income this comprises, the rent is clearly beyond her means to pay. Affordable housing might alleviate some of her financial strain. A 2015 report by the Institute for Research on Poverty at University of Wisconsin-Madison indicates the severity of the affordable housing crisis:

> The percentage of poor renting households dedicating less than 30 percent of their income to housing fell from 27 percent to 19 percent between 1991 and 2013. Meanwhile, the percentage dedicating at least half of their income to housing rose from 42 percent to 52 percent. Today, the majority of poor renting families spend at least half of their income on housing costs. And almost a quarter—representing over a million families—dedicate over 70 percent of their income to pay rent and keep the lights on. (p. 1)

These findings indicate that the biggest burden faced by many poor families is maintaining a place to live. Jackie is among those who face this struggle to secure affordable housing in a

neighborhood she deems as safe and appropriate for her children (Desmond, 2015, p. 1). Figure 14 shows her household expenses.

Figure 15.



The highest point in her life was January through March of 2015, after she had received "a very significant raise" which she thought would enable her to live a "different lifestyle." She was looking forward to their "victory lap" because "it had been hard for so long." During a particularly difficult time prior to her promotion, Jackie and her family lived in a shelter, an indication that securing housing has been a problem in the past as well:

> You had to qualify based on your income or familial situation. What they did was, they put us in . . . I was pregnant with James at the time, so I had the three [children] and then was pregnant. They put us in a furnished apartment, but it was a shelter. They put us in there, and they let me have the baby. You could stay for like one and two months before you can move out on your own. So that was helpful. The food bank, which would come by and give you what the grocery store was about to throw away, or waste, and so they will come by and bring you those. We were able to stay there for two months for free and work and have my baby and things like that.

After getting promoted and receiving a raise, which required a move to her current city, she hoped to give her children an "ideal childhood" but admitted that she didn't "necessarily get money management skills" and never learned to budget. "By the time I sat down and really looked at a budget and started working on it, we were already so far behind." It seems that Jackie's dire economic situation is exacerbated by her desire for her children to have this "ideal childhood." During the first interview, she expressed this hope:

> For my children's aspect, in my head I still have those ideals, when you think about . . . when I have kids, [indistinguishable] they're gonna go to dance class, ride horses, and da da da, so it's trying to still incorporate some of that, so my daughter is in basketball, my other daughter is in gymnastics, my son is in football, but there's the reality of you're one person, and you work and you have to take them here, pay for this, do that. I know some people would just take the finances and stop there, but for me, I'm still trying to pull to give them that "childhood" that ideal childhood that I always said I would be able to give my kids. So that pulls on me—getting my son into football, getting my daughters to band and gymnastics, and that's as much as a pull as the finances, and honestly sometimes it's

> more. So sometimes I'll take bill money and put towards those things and just have to figure it out.

This "figuring it out" consists of making arrangements with creditors and taking money from one bill to pay another. Jackie described herself as being astute at taking measures to delay bill payments. "The best thing I know how to do is make arrangements; what else can I do but call you and make an arrangement?" When these "arrangements" come due, she then manipulates her budgets to make ends meets:

> Most of the time it's, "What do I not have to pay to pay this? And what do I not have to pay to pay that?" But it has been like that forever. I call them my Peters and my Pauls. So I take from my Peter bills, and I pay my Paul bills, and take from my Paul bills to pay my Peter bills.

For Jackie, the constant shuffling she must do as a household manager is tremendously taxing. On the day following her lock-out, I asked her how she's doing. "We're just going day by day trying figure it out. I don't know. I don't know how I'm doing. I don't know. It will get figured out and that's just what I'm doing right now." I witnessed her "trying to figure it out" as she sent and received several text messages to and from friends and family who were sending her money while we chatted informally. When I asked about the children, she replied, "They're fine. They're fine. They keep thanking me for trying so hard because they see me trying and working on it."

Although Jackie was obviously concerned about getting back into her home, she displayed admirable calmness. The problem was not being solved in the time frame she had hoped, but she was still confident that their temporary homelessness would be soon resolved.

> This is life. Obviously, this is like an extreme. Stuff like this happens every day to be honest with you. If it's a cell phone bill or not having enough gas to get to work, the electricity being turned off, it's always something. It's always something. Never to this magnitude, but it's always something.

Jackie's endless "figuring it out" sustains her until the next crisis. She reflects on their lockout, "I could be distraught, but I know it's gonna work out regardless." In my final interview with Jackie, I asked her if she feels that this constant pressure affects her in any way. She responded,

> There is an effect. I internalize. I think for the most part 10 years is a long time, but in the big scheme of things, I think it's a relatively short time. I know I can't continue like this. I know it won't get me though all of my children's childhoods because I get things like headaches. I'm overweight right now. I do not handle stress well, and when I say stress, I mean that I can fly off the handle and things like that. So it does have an effect. I manage that most I can, the best I can, but yes, it has an effect on me. So what I do is trying to use that as my motivation to fix it, to get better.

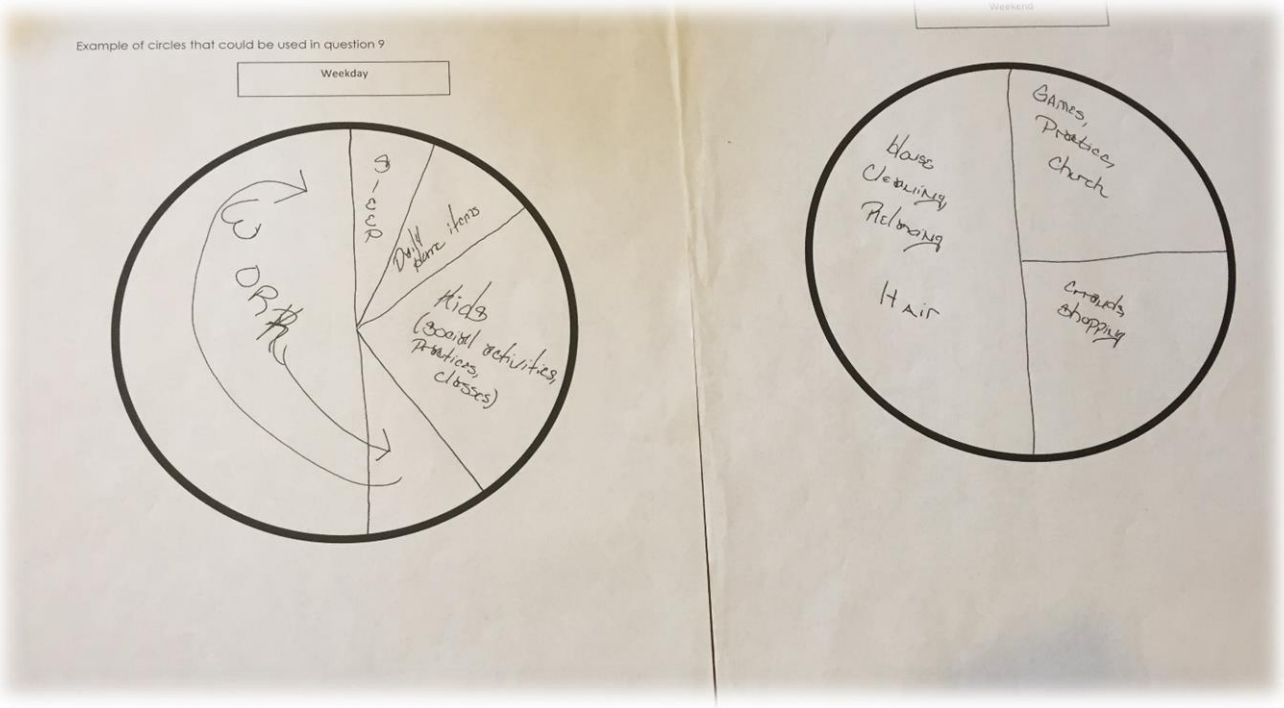
She never mentioned caring for herself. In their study of Black motherhood and self-care, Nichols, Gringle and McCoy Pulliam (2015) defined self-care activities as "lifestyle behaviors that are associated with decreasing risk factors for multiple chronic diseases, inhibiting the progression of diagnosed diseases, and reducing overall stress" (p. 167). Black mothers in their study were less likely to have a lifestyle characterized by physical self-care practices, and the primary way that they cared for themselves mentally/emotionally was by taking time for themselves. (Nichols, Gringle & McCoy Pulliam, 2015). When I asked Jackie about time she allots for herself, she giggled and pointed to the word "sleep" on the pie chart. She then added, "Whatever I can do I try to do. I already showed you yesterday. I do my hair. Usually that's

something I start at night or whatever, but that's it. I don't. I don't do stuff." Jackie's day-to-day living conditions might best be described as a juggling act. As a solo performer, she strives to keep multiple balls in the air. When a ball drops, she picks it back up and keeps juggling. The psychological strain she experiences is undoubtedly a consequence of this relentless juggling act.

Yet, Jackie describes her everyday experiences as "typical". When we were planning my visit, she detailed an itinerary that included work, her son's football game, braiding her daughters' hair, and church. According to her, if someone were looking at her life through a microscope, "they would see [her] working, they would see [her] care for [her] children—outside of food and clothes, the extracurricular activities. They would see [her] work ethic; they would see a responsible young lady." Having been continually working and paying taxes since she was 15, Jackie joined the Army right after high school because "there was no money for college," which suggests that college might have been her first option. Often low-income and poor families believe that college is a way out of poverty, but they also perceive that college is not affordable (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). As a result of this perception—that college is not affordable—Jackie has worked all of her adult life instead of pursuing a college education. Her pie chart shows that work and work-related task consume the largest amount of her time (See figure 16.) She describes her work responsibilities,

> Whatever they need me to do I will do--if I'm recruiting, if I'm investigating, if I'm interviewing, training. It's just you kinda wake up and determine where it is that you are needed any day. And so it's a lot right now. . . You wake up, you go in to work, you check your email, you figure out what needs to be done. Some days I get up and have go to Virginia. Some days I get up and have to go to South Carolina. It just takes a lot. It takes a lot of time.

Figure 16.



When Jackie isn't doing paid work, she performs the non-paid work of caring for her children and taking care of her home. This domestic work is devalued by those who deem impoverished Black women as incapable of properly raising their children (Roberts, 1994). Black motherhood is devalued, in part, because of the portrayal of Black mothers as corruptors of their children who perpetrate poverty by passing on their deviant lifestyles to their children (Roberts, 1994). To the contrary, Jackie tries to inculcate her children with values and skills gained through sports and other extracurricular activities. These activities require her to transport them to and from their rehearsals, practices, and performances, which consumes a significant amount of her time. While she's doing her mothering duties, she is still "working": "Usually, I'll take my laptop with me and work while they're at practice." Before arriving in North Carolina to collect data, I knew that Jackie would be involved in mothering work during much of the time that I was there. In fact, we scheduled an observation during her son's football

game, but after being locked-out from their home, her son had to miss his football game because his equipment and uniform were inside their house. The lock-out also interfered with another weekend activity that she had planned—doing her girls' hair. "I probably should have put that in there. So that was the goal this weekend." All of them would have gotten their hair done [by Jackie]. Further activities include household chores that have to done as part of regular household maintenance. When I asked Jackie about time she allots for herself, she giggled and pointed to the word "sleep" on the pie chart. She then added, "Whatever I can do I try to do. I already showed you yesterday. I do my hair. Usually that's something I start at night or whatever, but that's it. I don't. I don't do stuff." Accustomed to living in metropolitan areas, Jackie cited her small town with "no night life" as contributing to her lack of a social life.

Jackie's views on motherhood spring directly from her desire to give her children an ideal childhood. In this ideal childhood, her children have their basic needs supplied, live in a stable home, are allowed the opportunity to pursue their interests, live among diverse peoples, are well-behaved, and have functional relationships with their fathers. These ideals are the standards by which Jackie measures her motherhood.

With both ex-husbands being in arrears tens of thousands of dollars, Jackie is solely responsible for providing her children's basic needs, and, as a result of her lone role as provider, has had to draw upon government assistance for years. "I had no choice but to apply for social services." I found it interesting that when her housing crisis happened, it was Jackie alone trying to figure out living accommodations for her children. She resorted to friends and family for assistance—not the children's fathers. This system of social support, according to Seccombe (1999), helps single mothers build assets, relieve stress, among other things. Additionally, I knew immediately from our first interview when she described her neighborhood that her

children's safety was important to her. "I feel comfortable because of the one way in and one way out." She echoed this desire for a safe neighborhood, "Across the street from me is the sheriff, so that is helpful." In another instance, she repeats this desire for security, "I wanted them to be comfortable." Her concern for their safety manifested itself during our time together. As we concluded an interview that took place in the hotel lobby, we took the elevator up to my hotel room where the children had been instructed to stay until we came back. Once we were in the hallway where my room was, we noticed one of her daughters outside the room. Jackie scolded her strongly and warned her of the danger she could have faced.

Jackie recalled an unstable childhood, "We moved a lot, we moved a lot. Even though it was Jersey, we moved around a lot. So I never had a place to call home. I want to give that to my kids as much as possible." While she would like to move to a metropolitan area, she surmised, "I would definitely stay here as long as I could." In expressing her hopes for her children, she emphasized this concept of "home".

> I want them to know that they can go as far and as wide as they want, but this is home base, home base for them, that regardless of how far they go, whatever happens; it doesn't matter. You can always snatch back to home base.

Jackie goes on to narrate her own childhood instability:

> So, I talked about my mother and how she was having some struggles and things like that, so I just remember having a conversation with her . . . I was 11 . . . and she pretty much sat my sister and I down and explained in some way shape or form that she wasn't able to care for us anymore. And so I went to live with my aunt in Brooklyn, and my sister went to live with my uncle in Jersey City. When my father found out about that, he said that we can finish out the year there but that we should move in with him, and so I

> moved . . . I did 6th grade in New York, then I moved to Trotwood, a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, and I did junior high and high school there with my dad.

Jackie said that she felt like "an outsider" in her father's home. These feelings of being "homelessness" obviously shape the ways in which she parents her children.

Helping her chidren develop their talents and interests is another aspect of motherhood for Jackie. When she first told me about her children, she described them in terms of their interests.

> My 13-year old, she plays basketball, and she's been playing her clarinet. The 11-year old is my other daughter. She is what we call the tiny chef. She bakes, she cooks. She bakes me cakes. She bakes pound cakes. She made a cake for my birthday. I call her tiny chef. My 9-year old is also a little girl, and that is the diva. She is the gymnast, so when she gets her mind focused on something, it is Gabby Douglass everything. And then my son is the 7-year old; he's really into football right now—loves it a lot, but he is the class clown.

She sees it as her responsibility to allow for their involvement and contributes time and money to keep them engaged in their activities. In fact, Jackie says that the time and effort involved in getting her children to and from their activities is sometimes more of a pull than the financing the activities. According to her weekday pie chart, her children's activities consume much of the time that she's not working at her job. For her, their extracurricular activities are a necessary part of the ideal childhood she envisions. Cultivating their individual interests is important to her.

> To me a good mother is someone who allows her children to be individuals—that promotes their growth as individuals and takes care of their basic responsibilities.

> Obviously, they need to eat, they need to be clean, you know-those things. But someone who can really encourage their child or children to grow in their individuality.

Ultimately, Jackie dreams a "successful" life for children. "Whatever it is that they conjure in their minds, I want to be able to provide them with the means and skills or wherewithal to move in that direction." When asked about the importance of education, she considers it "paramount". Interestingly, she realizes that education takes place beyond schooling.

> I push college, but if they don't go, it's not gonna be the end of the world. As long as they continue to be on a quest for self-knowledge, whatever it is is fine. As far as I'm concerned, it's high school-college. But if you come to me and say, "Listen, I have an entrepreneurship idea, I wanna do this." Whatever the case is, I'm good with that as long as they continue to educate themselves.

This education can take the form of YouTube videos, seminars, military, or other means of learning. She realizes that "there's more than one way."

Diversity surfaced as an important value for Jackie as a mother. She described her neighborhood as a "nice little mix"in terms of the different ethnicities and religious beliefs of the residents. "You'd be surprised. I don't know how to say this politically correct, but [there are] Japanese families, White families, and Black families . . . . my kids love it." The concept of diversity resurfaced when she mentions her church.

> It's diverse in more ways than one. It's different ages, different classes, different races. And that's what I like about it. So there are couples that have been there for thirty to forty years. Single people that have just started going, single parent families, just an extremely, extremely diverse church.

Perhaps Jackie deems it important that her children are exposed to people who represent the diversity of our world instead of being surrounded only by people who match their race, family structure, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic background. She wants her children to "stay open-minded and get as much culture as [they] possibly can."

Jackie prides herself on having good children. She offered, "My kids will not be the one robbing you. My daughter will not be the one cussing you out in the store." She appears to be cognizant of the perception that children of single Black mothers are disrespectful and delinquent and is intent on raising her children in a manner that will prevent any perceived wrongdoing. I witnessed her firm parenting as Jackie reprimanded her children for touching things in the hotel lobby and for being too loud during an observation. Although Jackie insists that she is more patient and understanding mother to her children than her mother was to her, she seems to have some semblance of her mother's strictness. She narrates a recent disciplinary action in which she removed one of her daughters from the bedroom shared with her sister to her brother's bedroom. "You got to pick what's gonna hurt 'em," she explained. Jackie's sternness may come as a result of a concern that some Black mothers hold particularly given the recent onslaught of Black children who've become victims of police violence—fear that their children will be subjected to state-sanctioned violence as have numerous Black children. In a recent HuffPost Politics article, "Schools, Black Children, and Corporal Punishment," Startz (2016) reported "that black students are disproportionately beaten in parts of the Deep South. Black students are twice as likely to be struck as white students in North Carolina" (para 5). Perhaps, then, she sees disciplining her children as a preventive measure that will ensure that they are well-behaved and safe when they are outside of her presence.

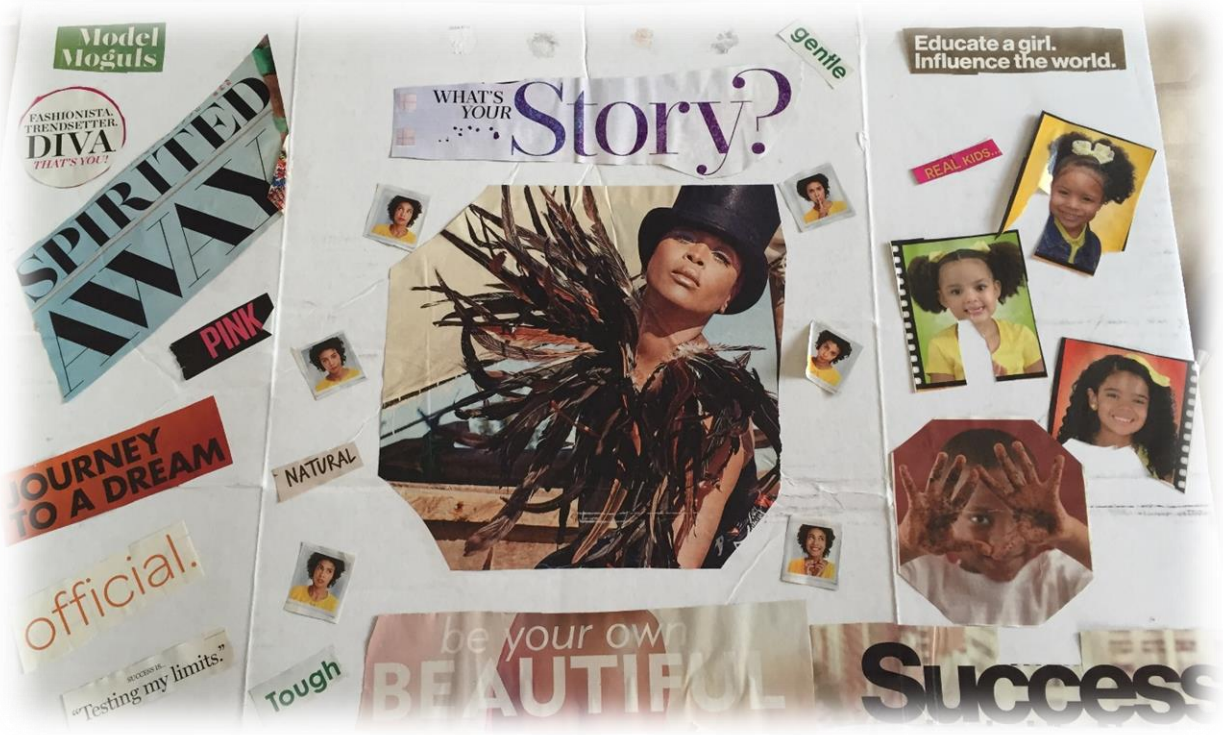
In one of her first emails to me, Jackie defined the terms of her relationship with her ex-husbands. "My second ex and I are on speaking terms. We work together well for the sake of the children. My first ex and I don't speak at all." She wishes she had a co-parenting relationship with her ex-husbands but doesn't. Jackie sees it as her responsibility to foster relationships between her children and their fathers. To that end, she provides means for her ex-husbands to communicate with their children who have never "spent significant time in the house with their fathers." Jackie has a house phone so that her ex-husbands can call the children directly without having to communicate with her. The children also have tablets and cell phones as ways to connect with their fathers. Yet, she still has to text her ex-husbands to prompt them to communicate with their children. These efforts to nurture the fathers' relationships with their children is exhausting:

> I won't speak poorly of them, but with all of my responsibilities, I can't foster this relationship over here. If you [the fathers] don't want it, I can't. I've done everything I can do to keep an avenue open. I can't. It's too much.

Jackie has also been careful not to speak negatively to or about her children's fathers in her children's presence, as her mother did when she as a child. "In my kids' eyes, their fathers are the greatest things." She goes on, "I've got plenty to say about my ex-husbands, but never in front of them." Just recently, she felt torn between protecting one of the father's image and revealing the truth to her children. He had wanted to stop by with birthday presents for her daughter who gets excited when her father comes bearing gifts. "I want them to know that a father is supposed to do more than pop-in on birthdays and holidays. He's supposed to be helping me do everything that has to be done for them."

Motherhood is clearly important to Jackie. Her self-created identity board has pictures of three girls and one boy, representing her children (See figure 17). As she remembered her first pregnancy at 19, she admitted, "To be honest with you, I felt like that was supposed to happen. All my life, I felt like I was supposed to be this grown person with responsibilities." In our last interview, I asked her about the connection between motherhood and her identity. "When I was married, being a good wife and mother was very central [to my identity], and it still is. I just don't have someone to wife," she giggled. "So I pour everything into being the greatest mother that I can be."

Figure 17.



Self-Perception of Social Position.

"My desire, my goal is to, as hard as it is, to get off every social service that I have, to support myself through the work that I do and the money that I bring it."—October 24, 2015

In my first interview with Jackie, after thinking carefully about the question I had asked, she said that if she could rename herself a place, she'd choose Fiji. Fiji, according to Jackie is everything to everybody—relaxing, exciting, serene, and calm. Perhaps, then, this is the way she sees herself—everything to everybody. On her identity board, she included a quote, "Testing my limits" suggesting that her capabilities are being stretched.

Although Jackie acknowledged that she's a receiver (of government assistance), she also regarded herself as a contributor: "I pay taxes annually and on time. I contribute to society." In another instance, she displays pride in being a worker. "I've worked continuously since I was 15." Similarly, she doesn't consider herself to be among the poor. As mentioned earlier, she distinguished her neighborhood from the ghetto. Further, she contested this poverty designation:

> I would not consider myself living in poverty. I know better. I know what that looks like. There are some people who are . . . We are not in poverty. We're not. We're not. My daughter has an iPhone 5s, so we are not in poverty. But yes a black woman, single mom, but we are not in poverty for sure.

Ironically, she made these comments while being locked out of her home for failure to pay her rent. In my final interview with Jackie, I asked her to expound on the previous statement she made about poverty. At this time, it becomes clear that she understands that poverty is relative and contextual.

> So when I think about poverty I have a worldwide view of poverty. So I think about those with no running water, those with homes without electricity, and more domestically . . . . you hear about kids who the only meal they have to eat is at school. So when I think of poverty, kids who literally have holes in their shoes or four kids in a one bedroom or two

> bedroom apartment. I have a four bedroom house. I just bought my son two pairs of shoes so...they were Payless shoes, but they were brand new to him.

Though not intending to sound "haughty," she does not associate herself with poverty. She recognizes that those with most privilege and powerful are those "with money, with limitless access to income." I asked how she sees herself in relation to those people. She replied, "I am not part of that category. No. I'd like to be one day. That's still the goal. I still want to get there." When I asked her about it would take for her to be a part of those with privilege and power, she elucidated,

> I could start right now and go to medical school and be a doctor and have a salary that gets me there, but to me, it's more important to be on purpose. I see that for me, that's a very blessed side effect of being . . . . of being on purpose. So I think if I do what I'm supposed to do, what I'm born to do, that'll come . . .

It can be inferred, then, that Jackie sees privilege and power as the result of having an education that leads to a high-salary career. Moreover, she views success as being connected to fulfilling a higher purpose, seemingly a spiritual one.

Jackie's views on poverty caused me to think for deeply about how I conceive poverty. I used an introductory social textbook for rudimentary definitions of a shadowy term. According to the text, *Social Problems: Community, Policy, and Social Action* (Leon-Guerrero, 2016), there are two kinds of poverty: absolute and relative. Absolute poverty refers to lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, and income, while relative poverty refers to situations that arise when people fail to achieve the average lifestyle maintained by the rest of society. Relative poverty sheds light on income inequality and the increasing gap between the richest and poorest Americans (Leon-Guerrero, 2016). Based on these definitions, I concluded that while Jackie's

life may refute a characterization of absolute poverty, she could be considered to be experiencing relative poverty. Although she has earned a salary from work, she still struggles to maintain what may be regarded as an "average" lifestyle. Yet, her home, car, and other possessions give the impression otherwise. As she said, she's faking it.

According to 2016 poverty guidelines used by the Department of Health and Human Services to determine eligibility for federal services such as food stamps and Medicaid, both which Jackie receives, poverty for a family of five, the size of Jackie's family, is income less than $28,440. I determine, then, Jackie's belief that she's not poor may have two explanations: 1) Her images of poverty align more closely with the definition of absolute poverty, and she has rightly concluded that her situation does not render her in absolute poverty. 2) Her determination to give her children an ideal life might blind her to her reality—she needs government assistance to provide for her children, and still she is under considerable financial strain. I believe Jackie to be among the 28.6% of African American women who are poor.

I wanted to know whether she feels that the status of Black women has changed over the last fifty years. To get at this question, I asked Jackie to compare her life to her mother's life. She does not think that her mother had fewer opportunities than she has. She apprised, "My mother could have strived to do better. I don't see myself any more privileged. I don't." When comparing her life to her maternal grandmother's life, she pointed out a common experience that may have deterred her grandmother's dreams and her own. "My mother's mother was like me. She wanted to be a dancer, but she had a whole bunch of kids early. She had five." Obviously then, Jackie sees early motherhood as a deterrent to Black women pursuing their dreams.

Since I wanted to know her thoughts on whether the status of Black women has changed over the last fifty years, I approached the question differently—this time depersonalizing it. She replied,

> In my opinion the status of black women actually gotten worse over the last 50 years. Having only been alive for 33 of them, I don't have the full context but even in the last 20 years it seems the status of the black woman has changed within our community. As a whole, I think women as a whole have fared somewhat better. While wages for work performed continues to be an issue, I think opportunities have been more readily available for women. But within our communities, our families, it seems like the black woman is undervalued and not respected like she was 50 years ago. It doesn't seem like she's revered as she used to be.

In this way, Jackie seems to attend to cultural shifts with the Black community regarding respect for Black women instead of the ways longstanding structural barriers still exist or not.

Conclusively, Jackie's day to day experiences as a mother are profoundly shaped by her desire to give her children an "ideal" childhood. This notion of "ideal" seems to be heavily influenced by middle-class norms like smart phones, vacations, and extracurricular activities. Nichols, Gringle, and McCoy Pulliam (2015) asserted that "Black women's experience as mothers may be shaped, in part, by a hegemonic ideal of motherhood" (p. 167). Because of the many barriers she and other single, low-income African American mothers face—low wage work, lack of education, and paternal negligence—attaining this "ideal" comes at a heavy cost for Jackie. Her idealization of family runs directly opposite of the deviancy frequently attributed to families led by African American single mothers.

Taneya's Narrative

Self-Described Living Conditions.

Taneya is a 36 year-old Indian/African-American mother of seven. She has seven children: a daughter, 21, son, 19, son, 16, daughter, 10, daughter, 7, son, 4, and daughter, 9 months. She is pregnant with her eighth child and has never been married. Taneya is unemployed and receives government assistance in the form of food stamps, Medicaid, and WIC. I met Taneya through one of my relatives. She was interested in participating in the study, because she "really doesn't have anybody to talk to."

She currently lives in the Black Belt region of Alabama with over 70% of the population in her county being Black/African-American, compared with 26.7% in the state of Alabama. Almost 14.9% of the population hold bachelor's degrees, and the median household income is $22,186, nearly half of the Alabama median of $43,253. The 38% poverty level is more than double the state level of 18.6% (United States Census Bureau, 2015). As of November 2015, the unemployment rate for her county is 7.3% (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). She lives in one of the poorest regions in the U.S. (Carlson, 2013).

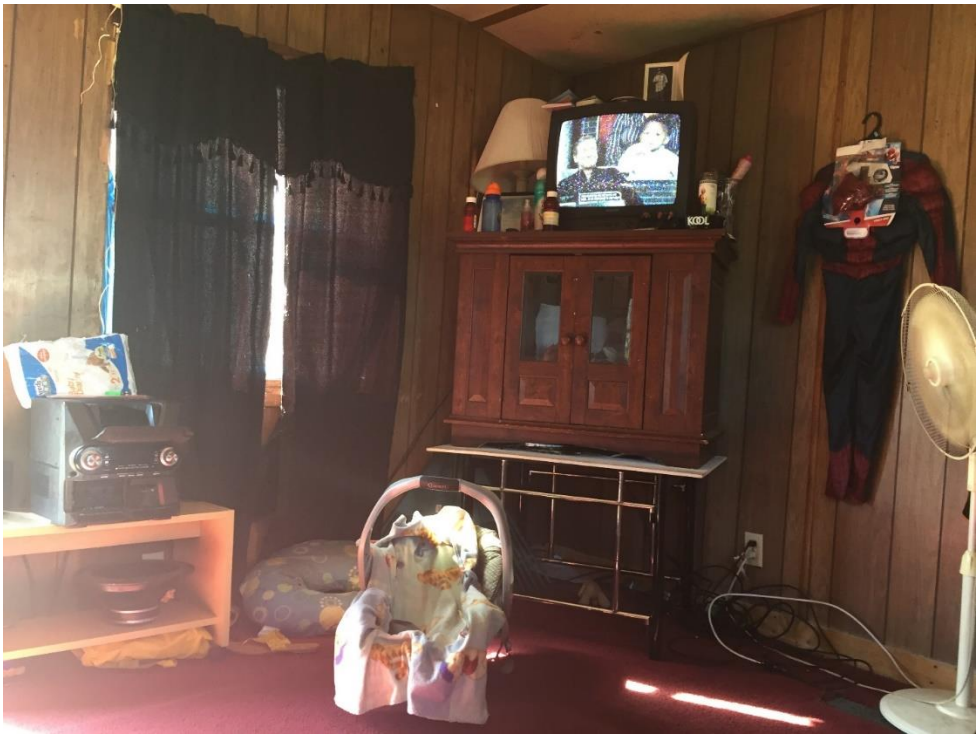
Her home is a single-wide two-bedroom mobile home that is inhabited by Taneya, her long-time boyfriend, and her four youngest children. (See figures 18-20.) Taneya revealed, "I'm paying $250 a month for this trailer. For two bedrooms. $150 goes towards the trailer to own the trailer, and $100 goes towards the lot fee." She is constantly plagued by suspended water and electric services. I wrote in my field notes after our first interview:

> Going into this interview, I knew it would be different. I am from this area. As a result, I had prior knowledge of Taneya's living conditions. Still, I didn't know that her conditions would be as dire as they are.

Figure 18.

Figure 19.

Figure 20.



Taneya compared her neighborhood to a prison. “I’m closed in. I feel like I’m incarcerated. I don’t go nowhere. I don’t do nothing. Every time I step outdoors, I’m with the kids. I don’t never breathe, you know.” Seccombe (1999) apprised that many single mothers who use government assistance, “have loving and devoted family close by,” but “other women do not have these family resources” (p. 18). The latter is the case for Taneya, who does not have a system of support in Alabama. She has lived here for four years, having moved from another state with her boyfriend in 2011. In the previous state, she was sleeping in shelters when she could and in the park when she could not.

> I felt like if I wouldn’t have gotten out of that environment, that not only would I not be here, something could have happened to my baby. So he got to hollering about how it was so good out here, and he would never do me wrong or leave me, and that I would do a lot better. So I came here.

Here is Alabama—her boyfriend's home state. Having volatile relationships with her boyfriend's family, she repeatedly spoke of the loneliness and isolation she feels here. As stated by Taneya, if someone were looking at her life through a microscope, "they would see sadness, loneliness, some happy—not that much. But it would be mostly hurt. Depression. Stuff like that." Perceiving that she doesn't have "anyone to talk to," the only person she talks to about her feelings is the "man up above." Her desire to talk to someone is one of the reasons she gave for participating in the study:

> Honestly, I felt like it was my chance to talk to somebody cause I don't have nobody to talk to. So it was [an opportunity] for me to get it off my heart (crying). To be able to talk to somebody, and let them know me, and how I am and what I go through in life itself.

Taneya's heartache and strain were reflected in her almost non-stop crying during the interviews. In fact, some parts of the recording were impossible to transcribe because of her outpouring of emotions. Her psychological distress is characteristic of many African American single mothers. Brooks-Gunn, Britto, and Brady (1999) mentioned that poor African American single mothers living under conditions of chronic poverty, because of their solo parenting and isolation, are predisposed to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. This seems to be the case for Taneya.

Taneya's move to Alabama was a desperate one. With both parents deceased and being estranged from her three sisters, she explained her decision to move. "So I feel like I followed him here because I felt like I had nobody else and it was the only choice I had." Still, she feels that Alabama is better than her home state. Although she moved to Alabama with hopes of a better life, she characterized the time from her move to the present as the lowest point in her life, a life that has been and continues to be marred by neglect and abuse.

Throughout my time with Taneya, she talked about being neglected academically during her formal schooling. She remembers painful school experiences:

> I used to get punished—have to stand in the corner and hold books and get spanked with rulers and stuff, from not being able to tell time, or not knowing math problems or not being able to remember words, which I still have that problem til this day, because I never got that help that I needed.

It was clear to me from my first few minutes with Taneya that she is only semi-literate. When she began completing the information sheet, she struggled with some of the basic language. I wrote in my field notes, "I began by having her complete the information sheet. She asked me what to put in the blanks for gender/age of children." At that point, I knew that I would not be able to conduct portions of the mapping interviews with her since they require reading and writing. I also read and explained the consent form in a way that she could understand. During our time together, Taneya remembered several experiences that brought her academic struggles to light.

> I was also doing volunteer work at their schools trying to get a job, but by me having a hard time with spelling and reading [and things] like that, they said I needed to know all that before I could be able to get a job. I tell them I know enough to where I can get by. I'm not just completely illiterate.

When faced with situations that require literacy, she said, "I'm a kid lost." In our analysis interview, I shared with her that I had identified this theme—that an untreated learning disability has caused her many problems throughout life—and asked whether she agreed.

> Oh yes, I know that for sure, yes, I still do [have a learning disability], even though I feel that I'm older now, and I feel like that if I had that extra attention that I needed, things

> would have been easier for me cause there is a lot of things that I want to do but can't cause of the problems I have and so…. yeah it really hurts cause a lot of the time [sic] My kids…like my kids have a lot of books and some of them have big words that I don't know or I can't pronounce, and it pushes me back from doing it cause I don't want to go to read it and make a mistake, and it makes me feel ashamed in front of my children, and I don't want them to see me feel that way.

Taneya thinks that she would be able to secure a job that would allow her to support her family if she had the knowledge and skills:

> But I could never do it because of the learning and all that that I'm going through. I knew that I was never going to be able to do it . . . So it hold me back, and as I got older, it just got harder, things got harder.

I witnessed Taneya's inability to navigate complex government offices during attempts to secure a government-issued identification. (I will elaborate on her need for a government identification in a later section.) Even I found the regulations and processes unnecessarily laborious. She found them frustrating and discouraging. Taneya also becomes frustrated when she is not able to help her children with their education due to her lack of literacy. She gives an example:

> Sometimes I feel like I should be able to do that. It's a lot of things that I be wanting to do, but I can't do it. They always want me to read them bedtime stories. Some of the books that I get or they get, I'm able to do that. But sometimes it just blanks out my head to where I can see words that I know I know and it just won't click. Like it's not there at all.

In this way, her intellectual deficits directly impact her children. She wishes she could start high school all over. "I feel like if I had the chance to go back and get that attention, I would be a lot

better today." In her county, adult education opportunities are few. In fact, I searched online for over an hour to finally discover one adult education satellite class offered through the community college 60 mile away.

As a child, Taneya suffered unimaginable abuse. She tearfully recounted multiple instances of abuse during her childhood during the first interview question, "Tell me about your living conditions. "

> As a kid growing up, I had to watch my dad going through drug, rehab, and drug habit. Him and my mom always into it and us going place to place, not always being stable. After, I'd say, maybe 10 years old, I was shipped away way to godparents that my mom met in a liquor store. And I was molested and beated by my godfather. And nobody wouldn't nobody believed me. I used to get whoopings for it, saying that I wasn't telling the truth. They said they were there to take care of me. It took one night for my godmother to stay up and to be able to catch him in the act before anybody ever believed me.

After this experience, Taneya said, "I folded myself in." To say that Taneya had a difficult girlhood is an understatement. In addition to being subjected to drug abuse, being transient, and being abandoned by her parents, she experienced sexual abuse by a father-figure—all before she was a teenager. The abuse continued into her teenage years. She described another sexual assault that happened during her late teens.

> We went to a house party in the same complex that we stayed in, and he was under the influence of some type of drug, that people was telling me afterwards, but he was under the influence . . . We was were all drinking and I know we were not supposed to cause we were all minors at the time…but uhm… yeah and he raped me upstairs in the bedroom,

> with someone else watching, inside of a closet and the with the music being so high up, and so loud, no one could hear me screaming and none of that and afterwards once I made it home and told my aunty and everybody.

Taneya never reported the rape to authorities because of fear of retribution. Brazelton (2015) imparted, "Sexual abuse is a traumatic issue that is lifelong and an experience that leaves a 'mark' on women for life" (p. 186). Many of the sexual abuse survivors, all African American women, in her study were abused again, which resulted in feelings of shame, self-blame, and depression (Brazelton, 2015). Considering the severity of Taneya's childhood trauma—raised by parents who were addicted to drugs and alcohol, separated from her parents, physically and sexually abused by godparents, and raped as a teenager—it is worthwhile to examine the possible effects of these harrowing experiences. For this examination, I turn to a 2014 TedMed Talk, "How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime" by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris whose career has been profoundly shaped by The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. She explained:

> The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study is something that everybody needs to know about . . . . They [researchers] asked 17,500 adults about their history of exposure to what they called 'adverse childhood experiences' or ACEs. Those include physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; parental mental illness, substance dependence, incarceration; parental separation or divorce; or domestic violence. For every yes, you would get a point on your ACE score. And then what they did was they correlated these ACE scores against health outcomes . . . . They found the higher your ACE score, the worse your health outcomes.

Dr. Burke Harris went on to explain that this study suggests that early exposure to traumatic events impacts the developing bodies and brains of children in ways that drastically affect their health across a lifetime. Not only are adults with high ACE scores more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, they are also more likely to develop life-threatening illnesses like heart disease or cancer. If given the ACE assessment, Taneya's score would most certainly be high as a result of her traumatic childhood, suggesting that her long-term health might already be compromised. Additionally, she could possibly be suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Lipsky, Kernic, Qui, and Hasin (2015) found that sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and childhood trauma are strong predictors of PTSD.

At present, Taneya shares her home with an abusive boyfriend, the father of her last four children and unborn child. "I'm with a man that hurts me," she admitted. She admitted her own culpability, "I let him, I do, I let him run over me, all over me." Interestingly, throughout my time with Taneya, she never mentioned her boyfriend's name, instead referring to him as "he," "him," or "that man," hinting at their lack of intimacy. Denoting him in an abstract way, using third-person pronouns made him seem distant, insignificant even. She apprised, "We don't have no relationship to where we open up and talk to each other. I try, but it never go nowhere. It go somewhere—to an argument." Taneya seems to know that she needs to end the relationship but fears not only being alone but also how she will support herself and her children without him, a fear at least partially instilled by him. Through tears, she recounted his threats:

> Every time I get into it without him, that's the first thing that come out of his mouth is that I'm not gonna make it with him. He'll say I'm not gonna make it without him, that I'm gon fall hard.

Additionally, he does not consistently contribute to the bills. (See figure 19.) During our first interview, she expressed, "They might come cut off my lights because he got his check and he didn't pay nothing on the bill like he's supposed to, so now it's $200. Not only does he fail to contribute to the household expenses, he takes the money she gets through various means. The last time I talked to Taneya, she told me that a friend had recently given her $600, an overdue payment that she was owed from allowing the friend to claim one of her children on the friend's tax return. Before I could express my excitement for her, Taneya shared the following painful story:

> Do you know that man took all that, every dime money of that money except $149 which I spent on my kids for Christmas and they were only able to get three gifts a piece? And he's still here. He took it out of my wallet my daughter said she seen him in my wallet. He told me was gonna give it back on Thursday. Come Thursday and all he gave me was $20.

Knowing the severity of Taneya's needs, I asked her, as I had done several times throughout the study, "Why are you still with him?" She responded,

> I don't know Ms. Peaches. I have no idea. I just feel like he has a hold over me or something. I don't know. It's like I need a push or lift or something, I need something to snatch me away or something. I really can't answer it cause I don't know.

She does know, however, that her boyfriend "should be more supportive of [her] and his kids." During one of our informal conversations, she mentioned his detachment from the children. Although she tries to encourage him to engage with the children when he's home, he passively refuses and goes to his room to drink alcohol. When he's not working, he spends most of his time socializing with friends.

Taneya, on the other hand, spends all of her time with their children. Each time I was with her, her children were just a few feet away with the youngest one constantly being in her lap. The day-to-day activities she chronicled are all domestic in nature.

> Every day I get up, I get them dressed, I get them ready for school, I start from the back to the front, I clean up and everything, I sit up here all day, there's nothing really else for me to do. I get on my phone. I go 411 trying to see if there's any type of programs or anything that can help me.

These domestic tasks are undervalued; nevertheless it is work. Taneya is a working mother but minimizes the work she performs, "I sit here all day with her unless it's something business-wise that I have to do." She further describes the mundane nature of her existence. "That's my day. There's nothing exciting about my day until the kids come home . . . Besides that, we just we just here."

In addition to her self-perceived learning disability, her criminal history presents another barrier to her finding paid work. "Every time I go out this road trying to get a job, they always run my name and see that I've been locked up for a drug felony, so they close the door on me. Don't none never open for me, so I feel like I'm stuck." Taneya's drug felony is for possession of marijuana with intent to sell. Her conviction during the late 1990's coincides with what Alexander (2010) called President Bill Clinton's "drug war aimed at racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 34). Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* described Clinton's 1994 crime law:

> Convictions for drug offenses are the single most important cause of the explosion in incarceration rates in the United States . . . . Nothing has contributed more to the

> systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States than the War on Drugs. (2010, p. 35)

She continued by deconstructing a myth:

> The second myth is that the drug war is principally concerned with dangerous drugs. Quite to the contrary, arrests for marijuana possession—a drug less harmful than tobacco or alcohol— accounted for nearly 80 percent of the growth in drug arrests in the 1990s. Despite the fact that most drug arrests are for nonviolent minor offenses, the War on Drugs has ushered in an era of unprecedented punitiveness. (2010, p. 35)

With a preponderance of drug arrests being for marijuana possession, Clinton's crime law disproportionately affected African Americans like Taneya. As previously narrated, Taneya suffered both childhood physical and sexual abuse—conditions, which according to Gross (2015) that lead to increased incarceration. In 1999, the period during which Taneya was incarcerated, "57% of female state prisoners were victims of abuse prior to their confinement" (Gross, 2015, p. 32). She attributed the mass incarceration of African American women to "exclusionary notions of protection" that render African American vulnerable to legal violence (Gross, 2015, p. 32).

Unfortunately, her environment is full of closed doors due to the poor employment, educational, and economic opportunities in the Black Belt area. I recall returning home to this area after earning my bachelor's degree and not being able to find employment in 1996. Not much has changed. Though there is a four-year university in West Alabama, there is limited access to adult education or job skills training. Taneya isn't asking for much. She naively believes, "I feel like if I can get out there and get a job to where I can bring in more than $215 [a month], which is what they giving me for all these children that I have, it'll be a lot easier on

me." Taneya currently receives food stamps, [7]WIC, and Medicaid for her children. She does not receive Medicaid for herself or welfare benefits for her children. When I asked why she does not receive welfare, she responded,

> I received AFDC for the kids, which they cut me off. I haven't received none in over six months because of the baby's birth certificate. It's only $20 to get it. But by that being the only income I get, I couldn't afford to send off for it. They helped me a couple of times, but by my ID been expired, and it's from California, they denied me. Now they let me go on with it. But after I had her, they said it was no good. They said I have to get one from here because I've been there for [almost] 5 years.

In short, Taneya said that her welfare and Medicaid services were stopped because she does not have a government-issued identification. (She also was not able to add last baby to her welfare benefits because she does not have her daughter's birth certificate.) Her home state identification expired before she got an official Alabama identification. I thought that the solution to her getting an Alabama identification would be simple enough. I would pay for the cost of the identification, so I did some research, and the next day, I took her to the local government office where she could get an identification. This process was anything but simple. Due to a recent closing of several government offices in her county, the only identification available at the office in her town was a voter's registration identification. Because of her felony conviction, Taneya is not eligible to register to vote. As a result, she was unable to secure a voter's registration card. Armed with all the documentation she had, we traveled 45 minutes to a neighboring county to get the non-drivers identification card. We were both excited, only to be deflated. Taneya had unknowingly invalidated her social security card, which she needed for the

[7] Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

non-driver's identification, by tracing over its fading numbers. She was told that she needed to go to the next county—which was another hour away—to apply for a social security card, then return to this office to apply for her non-drivers identification. However, in order to apply for her social security card, she needs a valid government, which she does not have. Consequently, I was not able to help Taneya get a government-issued identification.

The barriers, or closed doors, she faces are numerous. She is barred from voting because of her felony. This is a right that she would like to have, as she expressed when she explained the board she created that represents her dreams (See figure 22.): "This board is telling how I wouldn't mind living my life. What I want it to be like. I started off with voting, and how important it is for black women to be able to vote." She is among millions of Americans of voting age who are not eligible to vote due to a felony conviction: "Nearly 6 million voting-age Americans can't vote in the 2016 primaries and presidential election because of various state felon disenfranchisement laws" (Green, 2016, para. 1). In their study on the civic reintegration of convicted felons, Uggen, Manza, and Behrens (2004), found that some convicted felons associated the loss of voting rights with a "larger package of restrictions" that limit them from full citizenship (p. 274). Further, living in a rural area with a poor economy that supposedly led to a permanent closing of certain government offices and no public transportation stifle her ability to meet the requirements of a bureaucratic social services system[8]. Her lack of a valid government identification has ripple effects—from not receiving the welfare benefits that she certainly deserves to not getting Medicaid that would allow her to get no-cost prenatal care. Ultimately, these are all consequences of her being a poor, uneducated African American woman in the rural South.

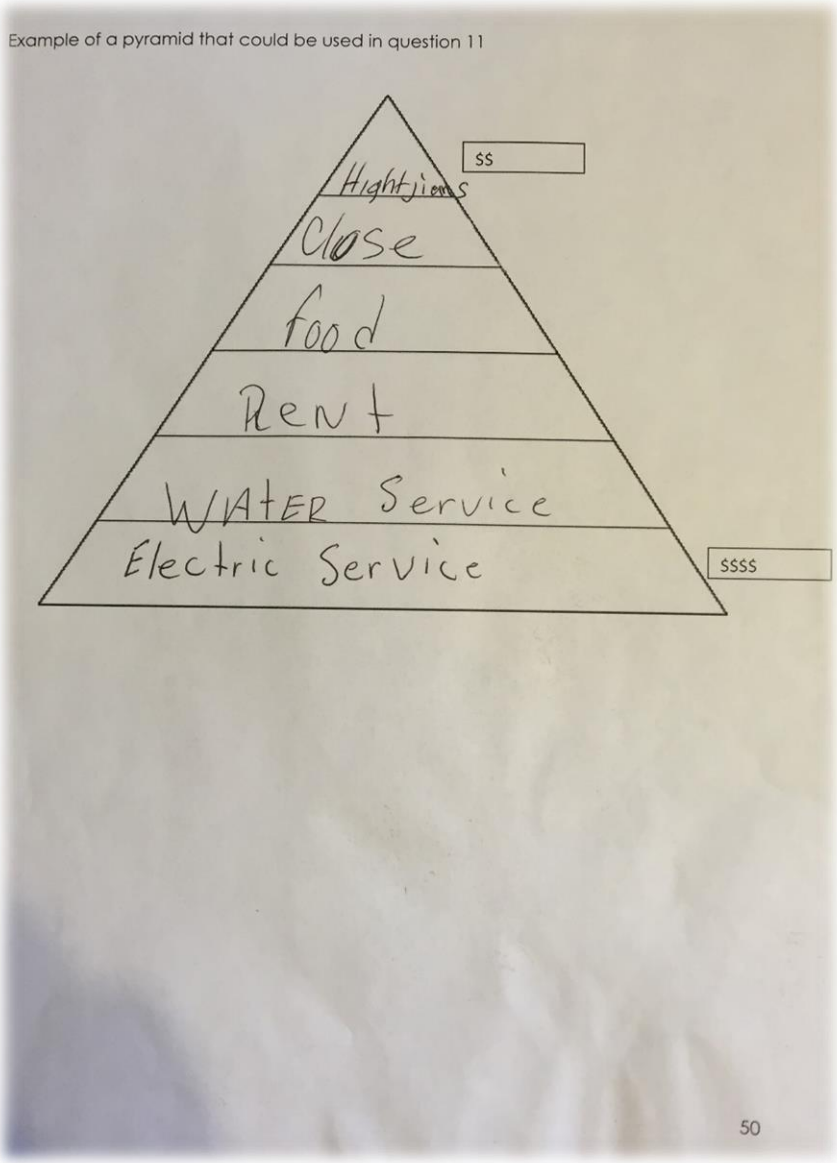
[8] The government of Alabama claimed that the state can't afford to keep the offices open, but many suspect an attempt at voter suppression.

Noticeably, Taneya mentioned seemingly routine illegal activities in which she engages in order to provide for herself and her family. She regularly sells (trades the funds for cash) her only disposable income—food stamps in order to take care of her monthly expenses (See figure 21). Her electric bill is most burdensome:

> When it comes to the electricity bill, not only am I having to pay over $150 every month, if it lapses it winds up being over $300 or $400 because I done let it run into each other, to where they have to come and disconnect my services. And then I wind up having to not only pay that whole bill but also a reconnection fee, which is sometimes $50 or $100 because of however they want to charge me to get it back on. I would say its electricity bill.

When the money from selling her food stamps is not enough, she turns to a local community service agency that occasionally helps those who can't pay their utilities or seeks assistance from her church. In addition, during tax season, she allows employed friends and acquaintances to claim her children as dependents in exchange for a lump sum of cash, usually several hundred dollars per child. As a child who grew up in a poor home and community, I am certainly acquainted with these trade-offs and witnessed them firsthand. Dodson (1999) found that women in her study frequently regarded the welfare system as somebody else's law that did not apply to them. One of her participants recognized, "They welfare system corners you into postures which require outlaw behavior just to survive, but then you are labeled as criminal" (Dodson, 1999, p. 141). Taneya's legally forbidden activities combined with her past felony conviction render her criminal, a designation that further marginalizes her.

Figure 21.



I showed Taneya an illustration of a mountain and asked her to recall a mountaintop period of her life. She initially responded, “I’m really trying to think of some, but I don’t remember none.” She then added, “except for when I was trying to sell them drugs and wind up getting my own place and thought everything was going fine, but I winded up getting raided and getting caught.” Taneya remembered with pride being able to provide for her first three children despite the illegality of her work. “They wasn’t wanting nothing. And I didn’t have to ask or

depend on nobody for nothing because I was doing something to benefit my kids." She seems to have the desire to be self-sufficient—to be a mother who is able to fully support her children—but the one time she was able to do was a result of criminalized work that led to a felony and imprisonment for several years.

Taneya, who first became a mother at 15, and her children sometimes suffer extreme lack, and she takes drastic measures to meet their needs. On the night of our first interview, the children had not eaten, and she had no food to feed them.

> I have nothing right now. I have sandwich meat in there that my kids don't even eat. And I'm pregnant with another child that I don't even know how I'ma take care of . . . So it's like I'm hesitating on asking this man [Mr. Poole] to loan me something and I'm not sure if I can pay it back. That's my life. This is how I live.

As a result of her dire circumstances, I took her to the grocery store to get food immediately at the conclusion of the interview. In some cases, Taneya described having to "flirt" with men to get stuff she needs for her children. The following narrative suggests that "flirting" might be a mild depiction of what she actually does:

> And it makes me feel like I'm less than, which I feel like I shouldn't have to feel, especially when I'm staying with a man. When I come home and come back in the house, they be like, "Momma, what's wrong with you? Why you so irritated?" I'm like, "Ain't nothing wrong with me." And I go to the bathroom, and I just scrub and scrub and scrub trying to get they hands and stuff up off me and stuff like that . . . I feel like I shouldn't have to do stuff like that, but I feel like I ain't got no choice.

She added about mothers who use government assistance, "We wouldn't have to sacrifice ourselves or things out of our homes to be able to make it by" if they had the benefits they need.

This story is an example of the extreme measures she takes to provide for her children. She gave another example of what she's willing to do for them:

> Before I allow my kids to go to anybody house to ask for anything, I will take that shame and that blame myself and go ask for myself (crying). Nobody in this trailer park ain't never seen my kids go nowhere and ask for nothing. It's always me.

It is always Taneya doing whatever it takes to support her children, not her boyfriend who squanders the resources they have. Taneya concludes, "If somebody would open up a door and give me a chance, then I would be able to do better for my kids."

When asked to name herself a place, Taneya chose the state where she was born. "Tell me why," I requested. "Because it reminds me a lot of my mom and that's the only place that I know of and by having so many memories of her being there, and that was the last place I seen her." In several instances, she mentioned the bond she had with her mother and frequently quoted advice that her mother gave her. She cherishes the one artifact she has from her mother's life—her obituary. Even though her mom drank alcohol excessively, Taneya loved her mother and believes "everything [she] experienced with her parents made [her] want to be a better parent for [her] children." She feels that she has an obligation to be a better parent to her children than her parents were to her. "I owe them that. I owe them more than that, so I gotta do my best to do right by them." Part of this doing right by them is "watching out for certain things." By "watching out," Taneya means keeping her children safe.

> I'm very protective over my children, you know I don't mind them spending the night at family but stuff like that, so much stuff goes through my head, like what if these kids or grown-ups are doing things to my kids and whether they going to bring my kids back, so that is why I am like I am with my kids.

Surely her overprotectiveness has roots in her own childhood physical and sexual abuse. She cried as she described this fear:

> He [boyfriend] says I'm too overprotective of the kids. For a minute, I wouldn't let them move around at all because of everything that I been through, and it got me scared that if I let them go, the same thing's going to happen to them. And I don't want that to happen to them.

Taneya recounted, through sobs, one time when she wasn't able to protect her children.

> But they [members of her boyfriend's family] took my kids and put my kids in some hot bleach water and scrubbed my kids like they were filthy dirty. They had my kids' body parts sore to where I had to take them to the doctor.

Clearly, one can see why she is hesitant to permit her children to go far beyond her sight. Her abundance of caution is rooted in fear. Her fear is not only fear of harm but also fear of being labeled an inadequate mother by the child welfare system, which may lead to her losing custody of them, like she did with her first three. When Taneya was sent to prison in her early 20's, her first three children were placed with an aunt. She tearfully described this separation.

> I wind up giving her custody of my kids because I didn't want them to spread my kids around and put 'em foster homes. I did not want them to have to go through that. After I was released, I went through the little program—parenting program, drug program . . . But by [her] taking care of the kids like she did, I knew I wasn't going to be able to give them that life . . . I would feel bad to take them out of a good home.

Though she believes she made the right decision to allow her children to stay with their aunt, she reveals, "I always wanted my kids to know that it's hard for me, and I'm struggling, and this is

why I made the decisions that I made." Having her children removed from her home because of neglect is a constant threat:

> You know. I'm kinda scared cause by them [members of boyfriend's family] calling children's services on me. I don't want them [Child Protective Services] to come back out to check on me and my kids and my lights are off because I'm scared they gon take my kids.

This is a fear that she narrated through another story:

> They winded up calling children's services on me, making it seem like my kids were being abused. That lady came to my house and had to sit up and talk to my kids one by one and then she talked to me, and she said she said that her supervisor had already went over everything and said that she didn't feel like it was going to be [sic] for it to stay open, so she closed it, but she told me they was still gon be watching me.

Her fear of being watched is justified as noted by Roberts (1997). Roberts emphasized that poor Black women are in "closer contact with government agencies" and, as result, are more prone to surveillance (p. 129). This is a fear expressed by Omolade (1986) and experienced by T.T. in *Set it Off*. Government agencies are tainted by dominant images that have long depicted Black mothers as unfit (Roberts, 1994). In a more recent work, Roberts (2006) condemns the scrutiny that results in African American families being more likely than any other group to be disrupted by children being removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Taneya's fear of losing her children to Child Protective Services is directly linked to her inability to provide for them with the limited government assistance she receives. Roberts (2006) explains this connection:

> Welfare reform, by throwing many families deeper into poverty, heightens the risk that some children will be removed from struggling families and placed in foster care. Black

> families, who are disproportionately poor, have been hit the hardest by this retraction of public assistance for needy children. (p. vii)

As a result, this is a system described by Brooks (2015) as systemically biased against Black women.

> In an effort to address the mother's inabilities, child welfare professionals seek to refer and connect her with services to address her parenting, anger management, financial planning, mental health, and referral to other agencies to support her voyage towards being a better parent. The shortcoming of this approach however is child welfare policies, practices, procedures, and Social Workers pay no attention to the interlocking nature of the facets of oppression and the "societal abuse" these Black single mothers face. (p. 17)

Said differently, child welfare individuals focus too heavily on Black mothers' parenting practices than on the systemic forces that may contribute to her being viewed as delinquent. In Taneya's case, a shift to "societal abuse" might reveal a school system that failed her, a penal system that landed her with a harsh felony conviction, a patriarchal system that places unfair demands on motherhood, and more. Taneya feels that her mothering, in addition to being surveyed by representatives from government agencies, is constantly being scrutinized by peers. "Everybody is talking about me saying, 'She's a sorry mama' and 'She shouldn't be no mother' and 'She shouldn't have them kids'." Obviously affected by these judgements, Taneya argues that they don't understand her household and what she's going through to take care of her kids.

In sum, Taneya, despite the hardships she faces, views motherhood as a blessing. Her children are as vital to her as the air she breathes:

> I feel like I been having kids for so long to where I didn't want no more kids. I started at the age of fifteen. And you know, I graduated, pregnant and everything, got my diploma,

> but after that, after the first baby, they started coming. And by me . . . not believing in abortion, I always kept my babies. I kept telling myself after the four year old [was born], I was done. I was already done, but it seems like they just kept coming. So I kept having to receive them. But I don't regret it; my kids, they are a blessing to me cause I feel like they all I got.

This language ("after the first baby, they started coming"/"I was already done, but it seems like they just kept coming") leads me to believe that Taneya doesn't fully grasp her role as an active participant in creating life. Instead, "they just keep coming." The importance of motherhood is further evidenced in a vision board. At my request, she created a board using materials I provided that shows what she wants her life to be like (See figure 22.). She pointed out three pictures on her board and described them as follows:

> Just these, happy family. Father and children. Bonding and everything- mother and daughter. This right here, a stable home. That's how I took it as a stable home with mother and children. Not struggling, they just happy . . . This one is health wise. Losing weight, exercising, keeping yourself up to where some of these pictures I would be able to do with the kids without being so tired and everything.

Figure 22.

Taneya even included a picture of a mid-size SUV and commented, “This car is a family car to where me and kids and one day a husband. It would be a family car.” When looking at the totality of her dream life, it becomes evident that she, like many women in the U.S., has bought into what can be a limiting dream—a dream birthed from the cultural belief that womanhood equals heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Interestingly, however, this is not the fairytale life she wants for her daughter.

> Like I always tell my daughter, “You gon have you a good job” She says, “Mama, I want to be a doctor” And I said: “Well you gone and be that doctor, baby, cause when you be

> that doctor, you gon have your own house, your own car, and everything will be paid for." "I said, "You gon be single with no kids. You gon date, but you ain't gotta worry about all that extra stuff."

Although Taneya, on one hand, desires a traditional marriage and values her children, she also sees marriage and children as burdens and doesn't want her daughter encumbered by "all that extra stuff."

Self-Perceived Social Position.

Taneya sees herself as part of a group of powerless Black women who receive government assistance. She appraises, "Honestly, it's not enough to even get us by, but we gotta take what we can get because that's the only help that we get." Clearly, she sees herself as a helpless recipient with no control over what those in power decide to help her and others like her. Taneya recognizes that her social condition renders her low status but believes that this status can only be attributed to personal choice.

> Honestly, let me see how I can say this. I don't think it's this person or black or white, or Hispanic. I think everyone can do. It's just up to you on how you live your life and what you make out of it. That's how I feel. I don't think this person got more than this or this person is better. I think that everybody is equal and everybody is the same. It's just what you do with your life, what you do with your own self. Your choice.

She fails to see all the institutional factors that contributed to her current station in life. Taneya's only blame is on a lack of mentorship, "I ain't never had that guidance," which thwarted her early dreams, "I always told myself I was gon be a registered nurse." When I asked Taneya if she feels that the position of Black women has changed over the last fifty years, her response was vague and contradictory, "Ummm, I don't know because, to me, it's still the same. It's like it's

harder." Given her literacy limitation, I was not surprised that Taneya was not able to give this kind of estimation.

Taneya's life has been marred by abuse and wrought by repeated unplanned pregnancies resulting in her seven children. She has a strong desire to support her children but an inability to meet all of their needs. Her fear of her children being abused is rooted in the sexual and physical abuse that she experienced as a child. Only her faith in God sustains her.

Chapter Six: Discussion of Themes

The purpose of this study was to examine how African-American single mothers who use government assistance define their living conditions and perceive their social position. I used narrative inquiry, specifically life history research methodology, to collect qualitative data that consist of interview transcriptions, field notes, and reflexive memos.

The previous chapter presented the findings of this study by organizing data according to the research questions to produce a coherent life history narrative. In other words, Chapter 5 tells the story, though partial and yet-evolving, of each participant's life. This current chapter has two goals: 1) to discuss themes that are common across participants and 2) to expound on these themes in light of my stated theoretical framework.

In her treatise examining the rights of African American drug addicts who have babies, Roberts (1997) admitted, "My analysis presumes that Black women experience various forms of oppression simultaneously, as a complex interaction of race, gender, and class than the sum of its parts" (p. 128). This intersectional framework informs both Black feminist thought and critical race feminism, the lenses through which I discuss the data in this study. In this way, I acknowledge that oppression is not additive: "Low-income black mothers' experiences are not a cumulative effect of racism, classism, and sexism but a unique integration of these social locations" (Nichols, Gringle, and McCoy Pulliam, 2015, p. 172). Further, critical race feminism places emphasis on storytelling; as such, narrative inquiry was used as a tool for self-definition, which is another tenet of Black feminist thought. Winfrey Harris (2015) rightly conceived, "No one can define black women but black women" (p. 12). Said differently by Hill Collins (2000), "Because self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, ceding the power of self-

definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning or supportive of Black women they may be, in essence replicates existing power hierarchies" (p. 36).

Before the thematic discussion that follows, I revisit the six distinguishing features of Black feminist thought as a critical social theory that "encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 9).

- Legacy of struggle. Despite differences in identity markers, social practices restrict Black women to inferiority that can be attributed to common beliefs about Black women. This historical inferior treatment has led to a legacy of struggle.
- Black women's standpoint. Even though Black women share a legacy of struggle, "there is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 28). Recognizing the heterogeneity of Black women is integral to Black feminist thought.
- Group knowledge or standpoint. Black women's collective experiences result in situated knowledge.
- Essential contributions of African American women intellectuals. A key task for Black women intellectuals is to investigate all dimensions of a Black women's standpoint and to analyze our own social locations, producing specialized knowledge.
- Significance of change. "Social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 39).
- Relationship to other social justice projects. Black women's struggles are connected to the broader struggle for social justice.

Elements of these key features of Black feminist thought are reflected in the discussion that follows.

Because the three women in this study share a social location as impoverished African-American, single mothers, they have a unique standpoint on mothering. Hill Collins (2000) theorized that Black women are situated knowers with "ability to forge these individual, often unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women's survival" (p. 36). Their shared localized experience sheds light on how racist and sexist structures serve to ensure their oppression; as a result certain themes characterize their lives. As the study focuses on the lives of African American single mothers, this discussion primarily focuses on four interrelated themes regarding the participants' motherhood. However, a common theme from their early lives—traumatic childhoods—is worthy of examination and thus begins this discussion.

Theme One: Participants experienced traumatic childhoods that impact their adult lives.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of each woman's narrative is the stories of traumatic childhood experiences, mainly at the hands of people who were supposed to love and protect them. Two of the three participants told stories of sexual abuse: Faith was sexually assaulted by her mother's live-in boyfriend during her early teens. This trauma was exacerbated by Faith's mother's refusal to believe Faith and Faith's mother's subsequent marriage to her daughter's rapist. Taneya's horrific verbal, physical, and sexual abuse by the godfather and a close friend as detailed in her narrative. She was sexually victimized as a child on numerous occasions. In a study on sexual abuse revictimization, West, Williams, and Siegel (2000) found that 30% of Black women who were sexually abused in their childhoods were revictimized as adult women. Black women who were sexually abused as girls were more likely to be raped as adults than their

Asian American, White, and Latina counterparts (West, Williams & Siegel, 2000). This continued sexual violation of Black girls and women may have roots in harmful stereotypes about Black women:

> Stereotypes regarding African American women's sexuality, including terms like "Black [J]ezebel," "promiscuous," and "exotic," perpetuate the notion that African American women are willing participants in their own victimization. However, these myths only serve to demean, obstruct appropriate legal remedies, and minimize the seriousness of sexual violence perpetrated against African American women. (Women of Color Network, 2006, p. 2)

These stereotypical images of Black women make them vulnerable to victimization; therefore, refuting stereotypical images with self-definitions is a central tenet of Black feminist thought, is incredibly important. Although the Jezebel stereotype was not the focus of this study, it, like the welfare queen and the matriarch, gives a distorted view of Black women. Jezebel is the "embodiment of black female sexuality" (Winfrey Harris, 2015, p. 5). When portrayed as Jezebels, Black women are supposed to have an insatiable sexual appetite that warrants sexual violations. Viewing Black women as Jezebels is reductive and dangerous, rendering Black women uniquely vulnerable to sexual victimization. The Jezebel label assigned to Black women is a result of misogynoir. Boom (2015, para 10) defined this term: "Misogynoir – *a portmanteau that combines "misogyny" and the French word for black, "noir"* – is a term coined by the queer Black feminist Moya Bailey to describe the particular racialized sexism that Black women face." Misogynoir is used to distinguish sexism as experienced by Black and White women. Boom (2015, para 31) further offered, "Blackness added to womanhood creates the expectation of rampant sexuality." This "expectation" puts Black women and girls in

jeopardy of the kind of sexual exploitation the participants in this study experienced. Significant to note, Black girls begin receiving these hypersexual characterizations early on. Brown (2009), in *Black Girlhood Celebration*, acknowledged that, despite good intentions, she too mislabeled teenage girls in a program that she led. As she watched a group of girls dance, she "dismissed the girls" as against the program's empowerment goals:

> We were all guilty of reading the girls' dancing as inappropriately sexual, even though it may have been singularly expressive. Black girls are too entrapped by histories of Black womanhood that equate Black female bodies with sexual labor and immorality. (Brown, 2009, p. 89)

Brown (2009) admitted that her fear was not really of the dancing but of the "masculine heterosexist gaze" (p. 90). This gaze objectifies women and girls, making them vulnerable to sexual assault. A victims of sexual abuse, Faith and Taneya are members of an unfortunate sisterhood of African American women whose sexual exploitation can be traced to enslavement in the U.S.

While Jackie did not share stories of abuse, she acknowledged voids in her recollection of her childhood because she has "blocked-out" many of these memories. As she recalled her childhood, Jackie realized, "What I do remember was not good. Probably would be considered child abuse right now." She narrated one specific example of neglect:

> My grandmother, when I was 9, I told my mother I had a stomach ache. She told me to go upstairs, go to sleep, take some Pepto Bismol. Went downstairs, told my grandmother I had my stomach hurt, and she told my mother, "Your child is not well. You need to take her to the hospital. This is not regular pain." I ended up having an emergency

> appendectomy that night at the hospital, to which my mother would have said "Take my ass to sleep," but my grandmother was there thankfully.

She fondly remembered the love she has for her grandmother but never mentioned love for her mother. Similarly, as detailed in her narrative, Faith, has voids from her mother's neglect that she is still trying to fill. She painfully admitted at 49 years-old, "I still find it in my heart to say I want my mama."

In addition to the abuse and/or neglect they suffered, each woman was separated from her mother as a child: Faith went to live with her father after her sexual assault; Jackie went to live with her father after her mother, who Jackie suggested had a mental illness, realized that she could no longer care for her and her sister; Taneya was sent to live with godparents, at whose hands she suffered physical and sexual abuse, for unknown reasons and was later returned to her parents. Though Taneya spoke fondly of her now-deceased mother, both Faith and Jackie revealed estranged relationships with their still-living mothers.

Childhood abuse and neglect shape the participants' views on motherhood and the ways they aim to mother their children. The next section explores five additional interrelated themes that characterize their motherhood:

- Participants view motherhood as central to their identities.
- Participants function within and outside traditional gender roles.
- Participants struggle to make ends meet mainly due to un- and under-employment.
- Participants draw upon religiosity and spirituality to help them navigate the vicissitudes of life.
- Participants are not fully cognizant of institutional barriers.

Theme Two: Participants view motherhood as central to their identities.

> *Motherhood—whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother—can be invoked by African-American women as a symbol of power by African American women . . . . (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 192)*

Though "mothering" is the participants' primary cause of strain, motherhood is central to their personhood, indicating that single Black motherhood is both enriching and depletive. Chaney and Brown (2015) questioned whether motherhood is oppressive or empowering for African American women, as reflected by analysis of 59 Hip Hop and R&B song lyrics. They found three ways in which motherhood is oppressive for African American mothers: 1) financial, emotional, and spiritual hardship for mothers raising children without help from the children's father, 2) paternal negligence, and 3) physical abuse by the men in their lives. Motherhood is empowering for African American women in the following four ways: 1) gratitude for their children regardless of the circumstances of the children's births; 2) single motherhood renders Black women worthy of superhero status; 3) mothers are credited for their children's success because of the sacrifices the mothers made; and 4) motherhood is a source of wisdom and morality that is taught to the children. As is reflected in their narratives, motherhood for Faith, Jackie, and Taneya is embodied in several of these ways. Recall, for example, Jackie's constant psychological strain due to her ex-husbands' neglect, Faith's sacrifices, and Taneya's deep gratitude for her children.

Hill Collins' (2000) theorizing of motherhood in Black culture proves helpful in understanding the value participants place on motherhood. She identified five themes of Black motherhood:

1) Motherhood encompasses blood mothers, other mothers, and other women-centered networks that care for children. Both Faith and Jackie mentioned that their circles of friendship, comprised in part of othermothers, were integral to their mothering.
2) Black mothers' face a dilemma in raising daughters: teaching them to adhere to sexual politics of womanhood and allowing to rebel against oppressive forces. Data did not reveal evidence of this dilemma, perhaps because this study does not focus on mother/daughter relationships. What is seen, however, is Taneya's desire for her daughter to be a successful woman who does not bind herself to domestic responsibilities.
3) Black women integrate their activities as economic providers with their mothering relationships. Work and motherhood are not in opposition to each other. All three mothers, Taneya to a lesser extent, are the main source of economic support and are the primary caregivers to their children. This point will be discussed in depth in the next two sections.
4) As community othermothers, Black women feel responsible for and accountable to all the community's children. During one of my interviews with Faith, she spoke of her sons' friends being "her boys.
5) Motherhood can be invoked by Black women as a symbol of power. This theme is examined by other scholars as well.

In her analysis of motherhood in the work of Toni Morrison, O'Reilly (2004) found that from Morrison's view, motherhood is an act of resistance that is essential to black women's fight against racism and sexism. When compared to dominant ideology of motherhood—private and apolitical—black motherhood has cultural significance and political power. It is through

motherhood that black women are "empowered to survive and resist" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 171). Undoubtedly, raising children as a Black woman continues to be copious in challenges. In her treatment of Black motherhood, Gray White (2005) wrote:

> Despite these travails, studies show that on average black women still maintain an optimistic attitude toward motherhood, if not marriage. Because so many black women are trapped in exploitive, low-paying, unsatisfying labor, mothering remains the most meaningful work available to them. For both single and married black women, being a mother is a major source of positive identity. Most still believe that motherhood is powerful. (para. 29)

Though the participants in this study did not speak directly of the political, or powerful, nature of motherhood, it is clear that they are empowered to survive and resist because of their motherwork. Their hopes for the future lie with their children. Autonomy is seen in the participants' rebellious decisions to become mothers despite the ways their motherhood is demonized. The themes in this section attest to the richness and complexity of African American motherhood, especially single motherhood.

Still, questions remain about why women who can't afford children continue to have them. Edin and Kefalas (2005) pursued this query in *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage.* Through the eyes of 162 low-income single mothers, Edin and Kefalas (2005) offered stories about why these low-income, poorly educated women have children they can't afford. Their findings mirrors some of the reasons participants in my study value motherhood. To begin, the women in Edin and Kefalas' study saw children as the best that life has to offer, not as a barrier to their success. Being a good mother boosts their self-esteem

and social status, much like a successful careers does for a middle-class woman. In my study, several times, Taneya revealed that her children made her feel like somebody.

> What I like is like . . . . they mine. I know for sure that them kids love me, and I know that they know I love them, and would do anything necessary for them. So it makes me proud to have them, even though I struggle.

DeParle (2004) described this boost in self-worth through his appraisal of a research participant: "Jewell was delighted to be pregnant. It didn't matter that her first son's father was long gone or that the new baby's father was in jail. Babies made Jewell feel alive" (p. 11). Edin and Kefalas' also found that for the poor women in their study, the ideal pregnancy age was significantly lower than the ideal pregnancy age of middle-class women, whose ideal is the 30's. Additionally, most of the women in their study did not believe in abortion or adoption except for in extreme situations. This is certainly the case for Taneya who explicitly expressed her opposition to abortion. Faith, too, shared that she had considered abortion during her fourth, and last, pregnancy but did not go through with it. Last, Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that these mothers lived vicariously through their children and are driven by the desire to give their children a better life than their own. Both Faith and Taneya expressed this desire, but Jackie conveyed it most profoundly:

> So there is a quote out there that says, make sure I get it right, that says "he who teaches learns twice." In the same regard, he or she who parents actually gets to live childhood twice. That's being a good mother.

Even though their brand of motherhood—unmarried and poor—is oftentimes regarded as deviant and pathological, unquestionably, for the participants in this study, motherhood is an honorable undertaking. Yet, they do not romanticize mothering. They acknowledge the

challenges: disciplining, providing necessary material goods, assisting children with homework, instilling values, transporting them to extracurricular activities, and more. The deep affinity African American women have for motherhood is shared by diasporic Black women. Flynn (2015, p. 368) noted a global perspective on mothering as undertaken by Black women: "In the Caribbean, mothering is viewed as women's core identity. In essence, Black mothering across the African diaspora encompasses sacrifice and devotion." All three study participants see their motherhood as acts of devotion, not deviance. I can still see the seriousness in her eyes and the conviction in her voice as Faith declared that she "would take a bullet for her [Simone]. I really would. That's what I think a mama should do. I wouldn't only do it for her, I'd do it for any of my kids."

In sum, Black motherhood offers single mothers a myriad of challenging and rewarding experiences. Gray White (2005) apprised that even during slavery, "motherhood gave women a reason for living" (para. 12). Her appraisal is still true for African American mothers in the 21st century. Because of the difficulties they encounter as part of motherhood, further research might explore other ways to assist single mothers in developing worth and value in areas beyond their motherhood.

Theme Three: Participants function within and outside traditional gender roles.

The three study participants function within and outside the boundaries of (European) traditional gender roles. According to Hill Collins, this dual functioning has historical origins. African women prior to colonization, "apparently combined work and family without seeing much conflict between the two" (2000, p. 49). It is this duality that led colonizers to construct Black women as having superior strength and savage versatility. In colonial travel writings,

African women were noted as different culturally and physically than European women (Morgan, 1997). Morgan cited one such account of an African woman:

> "When the child is borne [the mother] goes to the water to wash & make cleane her selfe, not once dreaming of a moneths lying in . . . as women here with us use to doe; they use no Nurses to helpe them when they lie in child-bed, neither seeks to lie dainty and soft . . . . They next day after, they goe abroad in the streets, to doe their businesse." (1997, p. 184)

This "discursive groundwork" affirmed Europe's "legitimate access to African labor" (Morgan, 1997, p. 169). In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis (1981) argued that during slavery, when it came to work and punishment, Black women were treated equally to Black men. According to Davis (1981), Black women worked just as hard, performed identical labor, and were punished just as severely as Black men—forced to operate outside gender roles ascribed to White families. Hill Collins (2000) aptly pinpointed three themes that characterize European motherhood but are problematic for African-American motherhood: 1) mothering is confined to a private, nuclear family household in which the mother is primarily responsible for child-rearing, 2) sex-role segregation and 3) measuring a good mother by her ability to stay home and make motherhood a full-time occupation. Perkins (1983) makes a similar point in her treatment of "the cult of womanhood," also known as the cult of domesticity, in regards to Black women.

> This "true womanhood" model was designed for the upper and middle class white woman, although poorer white women could aspire to this status. However, since most blacks had been enslaved prior to the Civil War and the debate as to whether they were human beings was a popular topic, black women were not perceived as women in the same sense as women of the larger (i.e., white) society. (p.18)

While the "cult of true womanhood" prized fragility, purity, and submissiveness, Black women were only expected to be submissive and obedient. A woman's place, according to these Victorian values, was the domestic sphere, and all training designed to prepare her to be a good wife and mother. Hill Collins (2000) probed the inconsistencies in Black womanhood and dominant ideologies.

> If women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as 'mules' and assigned heavy cleaning chores? If good mothers are supposed to stay at home with their children, then why are U.S. Black women on public assistance forced to find jobs and leave their children in day care? (p. 11)

Another of these ironies is that black women, in order to function as a slave, had to be annulled as women, as "true" women were not supposed to perform work of this magnitude. This defeminization of African American women rendered them lacking "an ascribed gender identity" (Mullings, 1997, p. 111). Davis (1981) surmised in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" that "The sheer force of things rendered her equal to her man" (p. 105). From slavery to the present, Black women, whether single or married, have been expected to occupy both (European) traditionally masculine and feminine gender roles, performing unpaid domestic work and paid work outside the home. Wallace (2015) conceived, "That she worked did not mean that she viewed herself outside a traditional female role but only that she had, because of the urgent demands of her life, expanded upon that role . . ." (p. 125) This expansion of roles typifies the life of Faith, Jackie, and Taneya. They perform the gendered work of "mothering" and "fathering."

As a matter of fact, being "everything" to her children is one of the psychological burdens Jackie frequently cited. Because of a lack of financial support from their fathers, she,

Faith, and Taneya are sole financial providers for their families. Black, single mothers are encouraged to perform paid work, but the work in which they engage in the home is discouraged. Reese (2005) contended, "While white middle-class married women are encouraged to limit work outside the home to take care of their children, the caretaking work of poor mothers, especially non-white ones, is devalued" (p. 27). In taking care of their children, they often operate as caregivers, disciplinarians, teachers, chauffeurs, household managers, and more. It should come as no surprise, then, that these female heads of households who operate within and beyond the boundaries of traditional gender roles are labeled matriarchs. These so-called matriarchs have been blamed as the root cause of problems in the Black family (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Yet, "the truth is that the majority of Black mothers have managed . . . to beat the odds and raise healthy and productive young men and women" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 238).

In his biographical essay examining motherhood in Jamaican culture, Carbado (1997) reflected on his mother's work:

> Women are perceived simultaneously as workers and mothers in Jamaican culture. They are patriarchally suited for both. Thus, even to the extent that a woman works outside the home, she is still expected to perform all the duties inside the home. This my mother did as a matter of course." (p. 343).

The participants' narratives evidence that this same characterization can be made of both Faith and Jackie. Because of racist sexism, though Black single mothers must sometimes perform masculinized and feminized work, they are not endowed with male privilege. Omolade explained this point: "Whether or not her child's father ever lived with her, the Black single mother usually becomes the head of her household with the same needs as a man in her position.

But she's unlikely to have the same material resources or social status" (Omolade, 1986, p. 3). Yet they manage to survive. Sparks (2006) apprised, in fulfilling both roles—caretaker and wage earner—single Black mothers "were repeatedly caught in no-win situations" (p. 186). Because they transcend both gender roles, single Black mothers are often given another misnomer—superwomen—the matriarch who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). "Characterized as emotionally resilient, physically indomitable, and infinitely maternal, this superwoman is endowed with those very qualities that preclude her exploitation" (p. 25). In other words, her perceived strength and extraordinary ability justify her mistreatment.

Even though African American single mothers often occupy feminized and masculinized roles, the single mothers in this study still indicated a desire to have men in their lives. One characteristic of the Black matriarch is that she not only strong, but she is also a man-hating, emasculating woman. Winfrey Harris (2015) explicated the matriarch figure as one "who has overstepped her place and become the head of a black family" (p. 6). In my study, I found no such matriarch. Instead I found three mothers who have positive outlooks on marriage and who promote relationships between the children and their fathers. McLanahan and Beck (2010) found that unmarried fathers are "highly involved with the mothers of their child during the pregnancy and around the time of the birth," but in five years, one-third "have virtually disappeared from their children's lives" (p. 23). Taneya is the only one of the three whose children's father live in the home with her. She mentioned that she asks her boyfriend to do different activities with the children, but he maintains his distance though he is in the home. Both Faith and Jackie gave specific examples of how they back relationships between their children and their children's fathers. On last Father's Day, after her daughter expressed desire

to have her father in her life, Faith went to her ex-husband's home pleading with him to play a more active role in their daughter's life. Similarly, Jackie said that she frequently texts her ex-husband messages like, "Call your daughter." Although they mentioned their children's fathers on several occasions, neither participant harped on the men's failures as fathers or bashed Black men in general. As a matter of fact, each of them desires to be married. Marriage was a salient aspect of Taneya's vision board. Jackie described her first marriage as one in which her husband was the head-of-the-house, a role she appreciated him holding. She values being a wife. When she was married, "being a good wife and mother was very central, and it still is. I just don't have someone to wife." At almost 50, Faith still dreams about love and heterosexual marriage. While pointing at a picture on her identity board, she explains, "This represents, this black couple represents love. I love love and I especially love black love. I love it and I hope to be there 100 percent one day." These findings are consistent with Jarrett's (1994) conclusion that Black single mothers see marriage as the ideal yet are less than optimistic about getting married.

Drawing from Dickerson's preference for the term matrifocal to matriarchal, these women, while at the center of the home life, hold marginal positions elsewhere. Their experience with oppression as unwed mothers in poverty, as hooks described, is distinctive from White women's oppression. In an important chapter, "Revolutionary Parenting, " hooks (2000) helps outsiders understand that motherhood holds prominence among Black women and is not readily viewed as oppressive:

> During the early stages of contemporary women's liberation movement, feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants. Some white, middle-class, college-educated women argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning,

> cooking, and child care. Others simply identified motherhood and child-rearing as the locus of women's oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, and a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood. (p. 133)

Through their "unique angle of vision," the participants reveal the particularities of life in margins (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 39). Their barriers result from present-day, synchronous manifestations of racism, sexism, and classism.

Theme Four: Participants struggle to make ends meet mainly due to un- and under-employment.

Despite the welfare queen myth engrained in the U.S. imaginary, the mothers in this study struggle intensely to make ends meet. The welfare queen is depicted as being a nefarious cheat who lives a life of opulence at taxpayers' expense. My findings did not reveal any such luxurious lifestyles. Alternatively, findings from this study depict three women who constantly struggled to provide for themselves and their children—mainly due to unemployment and underemployment. They are forced to become skilled, resourceful household managers who shuffle resources to take care of their basic needs, and when the money simply isn't there, they and their children suffer lack. Edgell, Ammons, and Dahlin (2011) reported that "men's jobs are often viewed as primary and foundational while women's jobs are seen as supplemental" (p. 1018). For the wage-earning single mothers in this study, their jobs may be considered both foundational and supplemental as their wages are the only consistent household wages. Two of the three women are employed full-time (Faith gaining employment near the end of the study), but their wages aren't enough to support their households. Faith works as a health care

technician, Jackie as a human resources advisor, and Taneya is unemployed in a geographical area where the unemployment rate is among the highest in the state. Each earned a high school diploma, but none hold a college degree. Their employment status is a current day reflection of centuries of economic disenfranchisement of African American women. Since the beginning of this project to the present, a span of two years, the pay differential between Black women and White men has increased. A recent report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research revealed, "Black women earned just 66.8 percent of what White men earned in 2015. That represents a drop from 2014's figure, which was 68.1 percent" while White women earn 80.8% of what White men earn (Hegewisch & DuMonthier, 2016, p. 2). Faith, Taneya, and to a lesser degree, Jackie, evidence what Scales-Trent (1997) imparted, "The economic, political, and social situation of black women in America is bad, and has been bad for a long time" (p. 306).

The mothers in my study reported frequently being in jeopardy of utility disconnections, evictions, and more. In *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*, Edin and Lein (1997) found that poverty thresholds are too low. Government assistance is often not sufficient to meet the needs of single mothers, and when these women work, their low wages do not allow them to provide for their families (Edin & Lein, 1997). These mothers report household expenses that exceed their income. As a result, many depend on income from other sources that often goes unrecorded and unreported. The authors (1997) reveal that "almost all poor single mothers supplement their regular income with some combination of off-the-books employment and money from relatives, lovers, and the fathers of their children" (p. xi). Though Edin and Lein's study is now almost twenty years old, their findings are still relevant. Participants in my students all have expenses that exceed the income they receive through government assistance, work, or both. As I witnessed with Jackie, low-income single

mothers often call upon friends and extended family for financial support. Faith supplements her income with money from her business, and Jackie participates in work she labeled "flirting" with men.

Hill Collins (1999) offered a cogent summation of the relationship between the welfare state and capitalism:

> On the one hand, social norms encourage women to remain in the home in order to care for their children and thus reproduce and maintain the labor force. But on the other, these same norms encourage women across social classes to perform traditionally female low-wage work in the paid labor force, such as teaching, secretarial work, and domestic work . . . Working-class women of color of varying citizenship statuses bear the brunt of capitalist development. (p. 278)

Two relevant news stories on major networks sought to expose the ways low-income Black mothers receiving government assistance struggle to make ends meet despite working. In 2013 and 2014, *Melissa Harris-Perry* on MSNBC featured Tianna Gaines-Turner, a married mother who had been recently homeless. Gaines-Turner and her husband work minimum wage jobs and use government assistance to make ends meet. After her appearance on *MHP*, Gaines-Turner spoke at the White House at Representative Paul Ryan's "War on Poverty: A Progress Report" budget committee meeting. During this meeting, Representative Tom Rice commented: "All I'm saying is if you rely on federal programs you'll never get out of poverty. The only way out of poverty is to be self-reliant and find yourself a job." Gaines-Turner believed that his response is just a "smoke-screen" that justifies them looking down on people like her. Second, *CNN Money* featured Safiyya Cotton in a story entitled "How This Single Mother Survives on $7.50 an Hour" to expose the difficulty in providing for a family with minimum wage income.

To get by, she receives government assistance in the form of a housing supplement, food stamps, child care, and Medicaid. Without this assistance, Safiyya believes she'd be living in a shelter. Safiyya and Tianna, along with Faith and Jackie, from this study are examples are the disproportionate percentage of African American women who are employed in low-wage work that is insufficient for supporting their families.

To shed light on the relationship between gender and economics, it might be useful to include a brief discussion of the feminization of poverty. Franklin (1992) explained,

> As mother-only families have increased, so have the rates of poverty among these families, who have consistently had higher poverty rates than have other groups. The term feminization of poverty emerged as a means of capturing the increasing rates of poverty among mother-only families. (pp. 142-143)

In essence, there is a strong link between single mother households and poverty. Women who are forced to support themselves and/or their families are the majority of poor adults in the U.S. The feminization of poverty can be attributed to reasons already stated: women being the primary caretakers of children, women being relegated to low wage work, and women being paid less money than men for similar work. This phenomenon is even more acute for African American women who have historically performed domestic work and presently work in service industries like health care and child care--almost 30% of African-American women (Guerra, 2013). The link between African American women and service work can be attributed to historical images of African American mammies, the content household servant to White families. Combined, the dominant images of Black women—Jezebel, Sapphire (Matriarch), Mammy, and welfare queen—have presented a limiting picture of who African American women are and what African American women do. Hill Collins (2000) appraised,

> The work performed by employed poor Black women resembles duties long associated with domestic service. During prior eras, domestic service was confined to private households. In contrast, contemporary cooking, cleaning, nursing, and child care have been routinized and decentralized in an array of fast-food restaurants, cleaning services, day-care centers, and service establishments. Black women perform similar work, but in different settings. The location may have changed, but the work has not. Moreover, the treatment of Black women resembles the interpersonal relations of domination reminiscent of domestic work. (p. 62)

From slavery to the present, African American women, in part because of harmful racialized gender expectations, have been victims of capitalism—their labor creating wealth for others.

Faith, Jackie, and Taneya live in an ever-present state of psychological strain due to financial struggles, with only brief moments of respite. The overwhelming demands resulting from single motherhood in poverty has many consequences:

> Economic inequality takes a massive toll on mental health — even more so than warfare, by some accounts. In fact, new research has shown that the mental stress of being poor is a major reason that low-income people are more likely to have high blood pressure, cholesterol, and become obese or diabetic, since long-term stress creates hormones that compromise the immune system and promote weight gain. (Mukherjee, 2013, para 6).

The strain from poverty is exacerbated by the scrutiny they face. Harris- Perry (2011) argued, "Because of their history as chattel slaves, their labor market participation as domestic workers, and their role as dependents in a punitive modern welfare state, black women in American live under heightened scrutiny by the state" (p. 39).

Longitudinal research that examines the lives of impoverished African American women over several years is necessary to reveal the long-term effects of the constant strain of mothering under extreme circumstances. I found a dearth of research into the lives of African American women who had parented children in poverty throughout the course of their child-bearing and child-raising years. Previous studies suggest that these mothers' wellbeing may be majorly compromised. In their examination of poverty, inequality and discrimination as sources of depression, Belle and Doucet (2003) revealed a direct correlation between poverty and depression. In addition, they cited research finding "mortality and physical morbidity, depression, psychological distress, and hostility" associated with lower incomes (Belle & Doucet, 2003). Notably, Belle and Doucet (2003) contended that recent studies underestimate the impact of discrimination "because discrimination is actually continual and routinized" and when compared to episodic stress, chronic stress is more harmful (p. 206).

Theme Five: Participants draw upon religiosity and spirituality to help them navigate the vicissitudes of life.

None of the participants sees a counselor or therapist, but their faith in a higher power helps them navigate life in the margins. As are most people in the South (86% in Alabama, 77% in Texas, and 77% in North Carolina), they are all Christians (Pew Research Center, 2014). My findings support previous findings that suggest "Black women are among the most religious and spiritual group in the United States" (Reed & Neville, 2014, p. 384). Several studies indicate positive results of Black women's religiosity and spirituality. Reed and Neville's findings indicate a relationship between religiosity, defined in terms of participation in religious institutions and adherence to prescribed beliefs, and spirituality, defined as one's relationship with divinity and focuses primarily on subjective individual experiences of the transcendent, and

participants' psychological well-being, situating spirituality above religiosity. Similarly, in their chapter on black women and the church, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) noted

> For Black women, developing spiritual practices and getting involved at church have provided significant resources for coping with the challenges of being Black and female—for managing the myths, negative stereotypes, and discrimination of the outside world. For many African American women, the church has been crucial for their very survival. (p. 259)

As stated earlier, each woman in this study experienced traumatic childhoods, and these painful experiences extend into their adulthoods. In a recent study examining "The Role of Spirituality in Helping African-American Women with Histories of Trauma and Substance Abuse Heal and Recover," Blakey (2016) found that spirituality can help promote recovery from trauma. Harris-Perry (2011) made a similar appraisal based on her focus group study of African American women. Simply put, "God is necessary for survival." (p. 221)

In her study of, "Religion and Spirituality in the Meaning-Making and Coping Experiences of African American Women: A Qualitative Analysis," Mattis (2002) examined the ways in which African American women use religion/spirituality to cope and to construct meaning in times of adversity and found eight ways in which religion helped participants navigate difficulties in their lives:

> (1) interrogate and accept reality, (2) gain the insight and courage needed to engage in spiritual surrender, (3) confront and transcend limitations, (4) identify and grapple with existential questions and life lessons, (5) recognize purpose and destiny, (6) define character and act within subjectively meaningful moral principles, (7) achieve growth,

> and (8) trust in the viability of transcendent sources of knowledge and communication (p. 309)

Data from my study revealed that participants relied upon their religiosity/spirituality in similar ways, especially to confront and transcend limitations. Religion offers them hope, guidance, and, in some cases, physical sustenance.

Clearly, Taneya sees the church a source of encouragement. "I got a church home, me and my kids, and my pastor always tells me that I don't never [need to] feel like the devil got me down." He reminds her that God will never leave her or forsake her. "So I have to tell myself to keep the faith and believe in God and believe in yourself." Her pastor also helps her financially. "Thank God for my pastor and his wife cause they wound up helping me with my bills and stuff." She also sees God as a friend and confidant with whom she confides her problems. "I pray, I talk to him like I would talk to a regular person instead of praying like that." Last, Taneya relies on God for direction in her parenting, "I pray and ask him to help me help my children."

I first evidenced Faith's religiosity/spirituality by words on her wall—"prayerful," "blessings," and "spiritual," among others. Then, a cross on her mantle indicates her Christianity. She began our interview by telling me that God is the center of her life and made references to her faith throughout our time together. She recalled a particularly trying time. "When I got evicted, that was nothing but God. I got evicted and moved into another apartment, into a one-bedroom." During the analysis interview, I shared with Faith that her faith surfaced as a theme in her interviews and asked her if I was accurate. She responded emphatically,

> Absolutely, I think that is dead on. It's spot on. I think I know that that is spot on. I am definitely a person of faith. Even through this trial, because it has definitely been a trial, I

> have to be real and say I had moments where I was mad at God, I questioned God, I interrogated God, and I kept it real with God. I mean I have conversations. I'm not so much a “this” and a “thou” all proper, it’s real. It’s real conversations. It’s been many moments where I just had to keep it real and say "I don't understand what you doing but I'm going to trust you. I'm going to hold on.” There have been times where I felt like I'm just not going to make it. I'm not going to make it unless you step in and do something right now. And there have been little signs along the way. I want to the big gigantic ones, but they're been little signs along the way. There’s always been a ram in the bush.

Clearly, she sees God as a divine orchestrator of her life. Though she doesn’t always understand God’s plan, she trusts God to always provide.

On the timeline of significant events in her life, Jackie included her salvation. She explained what led up to this event:

> I came here in November, then that January, I started going to church. My first husband was Jehovah’s Witness. That’s what we were studying and focusing on. In 2005, I came down here and no offense to anybody, but I knew that wasn’t the truth of God’s word. So in 2005, after having some friends and everybody talk to me, that’s when I got saved. So that was significant for me.

Since that time, it appears that church has been important for Jackie and she included it on her pie chart as one of her weekend activities. Jackie appreciates that church provides activities for her children. She gave one example.

> They took Alexis to a conference called Acquire the Fire. It was a youth conference. You couldn’t tell it wasn’t a concert. They filled the stadium. It was in Greensboro. They

> filled the stadium, they had Christian pop artists they had speakers and she loved it. She still knows the songs that she learned there.

Jackie sees her faith as a source of strength: "Sometimes you just feel stuck to one place. I remember being there- where it was just so overwhelming that I felt stuck, and faith is what allowed me to move my feet."

Further, Musgrave, Allen, and Allen (2002) indicated a link between spirituality and religiosity with positive health outcomes of women of color. For Black women in particular, religion and spirituality are vital to their existence:

> Since slavery, the Black church has served a critical role in Black women's lives. God is seen as a deliverer from unjust suffering and the comforter in times of trouble. The church provides spiritual renewal and empowerment. In Black churches women feel free to receive and exhibit the reviving power of the Spirit as a healing resource supplying meaning in the midst of trials and tribulations. The overt expression of emotion in Black churches offers an outlet for pent-up anguish. Women become therapists to each other and the church assumes the role of 'an asylum of therapeutic assistance," as well as a place of shelter. (Musgrave, Allen & Allen, 2002).

Yet some scholars, namely womanist theologians, contend that, religion, the patriarchal Christian church specifically, historically has been an oppressive institution for African American women (Grant, 1982; Coleman, 2009). Womanist theologians attempt to reframe racist and sexist interpretations of scripture in a manner that liberates and empowers African American women. Womanists emphasize the notion that God identifies with and liberates the oppressed (Musgrave, Allen & Allen, 2002). Future research might consider the ways that patriarchal institutional practices of the Christian church might stifle the socioeconomic liberation of African American

single mothers instead of simply helping them to "cope" with the stressors of poverty. Additionally, researchers could examine how womanist theological beliefs and practices, with their emphasis on liberation of the oppressed, might be useful in dismantling the barriers that prevent African American single mothers from getting out of poverty.

Theme Six: Participants are not fully cognizant of institutional barriers.

All three participants in my study failed to see themselves as victims of systemic oppression. For the most, they saw their predicaments as a result of personal choices, such as not having a college education, having a criminal record, or having children at a young age. They did not point to racism, sexism, or classism; none expressed any lived experiences with oppression or discrimination. Perhaps they are too busy *being* an African American single mother to ponder how their *being* is shaped by institutional barriers. As Mock (2015) wrote about the women in her family:

> My grandmother and my two aunts were an exhibition in resilience and resourcefulness and black womanhood. They rarely talked about the unfairness of the world with the words that I use now with my social justice friends, words like *intersectionality* and *equality*, *oppression*, and *discrimination*. They didn't discuss those things because they were too busy living it, navigating it, surviving it. (p. 65)

Clearly, however, Faith, Jackie, and Taneya have been victimized by systems that serve to maintain their oppression. To begin, as single mothers, Faith, Jackie, and Taneya are solely responsible for the caretaking of their children mainly because our patriarchal society makes women responsible for domestic tasks. As a result of what Kimmel (2013) referred to as *the gendered politics of housework and child care,* women are expected to perform household chores and take care of children, freeing fathers from this expectation (p. 156). Yet, Faith, Jackie, and

Taneya do not reap the benefits of the adverse—having their children's father provide for them financially. Next, because of capitalistic exploitation of women of color, we disproportionately perform low-wage work, such as Faith's hourly job as a healthcare technician. Jackie is being exploited by having to "take her laptop" to her children's practices and rehearsals so that she can complete work projects. Similarly, employed African American women suffer from what presidential candidate Bernie Sanders called a "pay gulf" instead of a "pay gap" when compared to White men. (Leonhardt, 2016) Further, as Alexander (2010) brilliantly documented in *The New Jim Crow*, institutional racism is evidenced in the 21st century mass incarceration of African Americans. This hyper-surveillance of African American communities and families, in addition to the pervasive criminalization of African Americans for non-violent offenses result in severe disenfranchisement. Taneya's life history is ripe with divestments of rights—her right to vote because of a felony for selling marijuana and her right to parent to her children without fear of government intrusion.

I was not shocked by this lack of recognition of how cultural myths and stereotypes impact their everyday experiences, for as Mullings (1997) supposed, "The images, representations, and symbols that form ideologies often have complex meanings and associations that are not always easily or readily articulated, making them difficult to challenge" (p. 110). Yet, these (mis)representations have very real implications. This point can be illustrated by both Faith and Taneya's sexual abuse. Historical portrayals of African American women and girls as Jezebels lead to us being oversexualized and vulnerable to sexual exploitation. In a similar manner, images of a strong matriarch lead African American women to pretend that we are supernaturally tough women, a topic expertly covered by Wallace (2015). We disregard our

mistreatment and neglect because we have the strength to handle it. Interestingly, Faith and Jackie both described themselves as strong.

While Faith, Jackie, and Taneya did not pinpoint any of these injustices, during other times in our modern era, impoverished Black women were cognizant of the ways the system worked against them and actively worked to counter this oppression. In her discussion of Black domestic workers, Thornton Dill (1983) observed their recognition of how their conditions and position were shaped by their identity markers: The women themselves had a very clear sense that the social inequities which relegated them and many of their peers to household service labor were based upon their race, class, and gender" (p. 37). Additionally, Tuck (2010) cited welfare activist, Johnnie Tillmon's work with National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Tillmon realized that income inequality was a feminist issue and a race issue and challenged middle-class White women to join in the struggle for economic opportunity. Similarly, Orleck (2005, p. 2) chronicled the work of low-income welfare mothers in Las Vegas who formed Operation Life, an initiative in which "welfare mothers demanded a share of political power and a slice of American prosperity." Operation Life, according to Orleck, was not anomalous; in fact, it was one of many antipoverty campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s.

The participants in this study were not involved in such work. Perhaps, too, they have bought into the cultural deficits narrative that regards the challenges encountered by Black people as attributed to a failure to conform to social norms. I found hints of this narrative in Faith's explanation for the disproportionate percentage of Black women in poverty:

> Generational. I don't want to call it a curse. Generational. I think it's generational. A lot of times, people tend to stay in what they come from. They become a product of their circumstances. That's why I think its high for Latinos and Black women. Same thing,

> you can flip that around for Caucasian women and the same thing. A lot of times, they are from that two parent home. Mom and Dad have that college education and stable home and all that comes with it, and that's what they go and do. That's what they're taught to do.

Perhaps her feelings of personal failure are the source of shame Faith initially felt. "Feelings of low self-esteem are often triggered, particularly when a woman internalizes the bigoted message, blaming and beating up on herself, rather than focusing on the real, external problem" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 74). In most cases, poverty in the U.S. cannot be attributed to a character flaw or to ways of life associated with a particular culture. Instead, any examination of poverty in a racist, sexist, capitalistic economic system must be framed with this system in mind. "In a society that sees as powerful both whiteness and maleness, black women possess no characteristic associated with power" (Scales-Trent, 1997, p. 307). As a result, the African American single mothers in this study struggle to overcome longstanding institutional barriers that they fail to even recognize. Future research might include ways to help African American single mothers to identify ways that their life choices, which participants in this study owned, are influenced by externally imposed barriers. Why do they hold positions as mules and pack-horses?

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this study was conducted with an acknowledgement of the common plight of African diasporic women. Underscoring this need for a transnational context, Hill Collins (2000, p. 19) noted, "Black feminist thought constitutes one part of a much larger social justice project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women." In this sense, while focused on African American women in particular, this work is inherently connected to social justice work generally. My project is mainly an examination of the lived experienced of African American single mothers who are experiencing poverty through the use of life history research. This investigation sheds lights, not only on the extent to which participants' lives reflect commonly held cultural myths and stereotypes, but also reveals how Faith's, Jackie's, and Taneya's realities have been shaped by dominant ideologies. Their stories "help expose the ordinariness of racism [and sexism] and validate that the experiences of people of color are important and critical bases for understanding an American legality that perpetuates" (p. 3).

As a minoritized population that has inherited a legacy of harmful, externally imposed mischaracterizations, I honor the voices of the participants in an effort to illuminate their self-defined realities because, "we still live in a country where the myths about Black women too often obscure the truth" (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 60). Maurer (2000) argued that stereotypes of Black women have been used to influence U.S. public policy since the 17th century. "From the commodification of slave mothers' bodies in antebellum period to the race and class bound national policies of more recent decades, childbirth has never been a strictly biological phenomenon" (Fett, in Hine 2005, p. 24). Maurer's attempt is similar to one of my own: "to push policy-makers and policy analysts to consider the ways in which stereotypes that

rely on multiple axes of power and difference seep into the fabric of public policies and 'color' the ways in which we discuss and analyze them" (Maurer, 2000, p. 37). These *embodied public policies* (Maurer, 2000) or as Hancock (2004) labeled them, *politics of disgust*, are misinformed by raced, classed, and gendered stereotypes such as the welfare queen and the matriarch, among others.

African American single mothers who receive government assistant embody motherhood in a politically contested space. In this space, they are involved in numerous struggles to mother their children on their own terms: They are expected to be devoted mothers whose children are their first priority; at the same time, they are judged as lazy and unmotivated if they are not employed full-time and financially independent. Viewed as pathological, they are discouraged from becoming mothers though they value motherhood. They are subject to the restrictions tied to government assistance, yet they want to be autonomous adults who make their own decisions.

The year 2016 marks 20 years since President Bill Clinton's attempt at welfare reform through his Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA). Clinton's welfare reform hurt many African American single mothers.

> "People who were able to find work, either because they live in places where work was available, or because they were better qualified than the average welfare recipient, have done pretty well." said Christopher Jencks, an expert on poverty at Harvard University. "People who can't find work are where they were before they had welfare at all. That's a big problem. People have no means of support for themselves or their children." (Ehrenfreund, 2016, para 7)

The participants in my study expressed this same desire—to be able to work and provide for their families. What was needed then is still needed now—work that pays a living wage.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, two recent initiatives—the congressional caucus and the NoVo grant—are directing much-deserved attention to African American women and other women of color. These initiatives can be informed by research projects like this one, which use critical race feminism as a theoretical framework. As a reminder, critical race feminism "call[s] for a deeper understanding of the lives of women of color based upon their multiple identities" (Wing & Willis, 2009, p. 3). Like Black feminist thought, critical race feminism

- Places women of color at the center of analysis
- Concerns itself with practice, not just theory
- Uses multiple axes of analysis

Crenshaw (1991) explained this form of analysis in her work: "My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1244). Through analyzing the life histories through an intersectional lens, the ways in which participants suffer oppression as a result of being impoverished African American women, as opposed to poor + African American + women, becomes apparent.

Limitations of Study

An obvious limitation of this study is the number of participants. Currently, more than 600,000 African American women live in poverty. This project examined the lives of only three living in the Southern United States. Consequently, as is characteristic of much of qualitative research, extrapolating findings should be avoided. The value, however, is in the profound insight gained from examining the participants' lives. This examination illuminates the ways racist, sexist, and capitalist structures intersect to limit the opportunities available to the three participants. These findings are consistent with previous studies of African American single

mothers who use government assistance (Jarrett, 1994, 1996, & 1998; Zucchino, 1997; Edin & Lein's, 1997; Omolade, 1986; Seccombe, 1999; Turner & Bachrach Ehlers, 2002; Hays, 2003).

Next, I collected data with the participants over a relatively short period of time—from October to December. As a result, the study lacks the firsthand observations that are made possible by months and years of sustained ethnographic examination. Still, the rich data gained from in-depth interviews, including mapping projects, enabled me to construct comprehensive life histories for each of the three participants.

Additionally, though the extent to which my positionality impacted the investigation is impossible to estimate, I am certain that, because of my identity as a daughter of a poor African American woman who used multiple forms of government assistance to support my siblings and me, I possessed insider knowledge that influenced some of the assumptions I made about the women before I started the investigation. At the same time, my education and career have somewhat removed me from African American women who are poor. In these ways, I was both an outsider and an insider who was uniquely positioned to conduct this study.

Implications

As a former middle school teacher and teacher educator, I admit that I bought into some of the narrow-minded narratives about African American single mothers—that they were disengaged from schooling because they don't value education, that they have misplaced priorities, and that their living conditions and social position were solely a result of the choices they made. This study has caused me to understand the ways African American women's choices are made within institutional structures meant to sustain their oppression. As such, their current gendered, raced, and classed experiences are predicated on distorted images birthed during European colonialism of Africa. These images pervade contemporary culture.

> The media, pop-culture critics and brainwashed members of the black community may think black women are problems. In truth, African American women are seen as troubling because of the reductive way they have been viewed for hundreds of years. But black women are not waiting to be fixed; they are fighting to be free—free to define themselves absent narratives driven by race and gender biases" (Winfrey Harris, 2015, p. 10).

This life history project, then, is a decolonizing work in which participants were free to define themselves. As stated in the introduction, the United Nations has named 2015-2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent. One of its stated educational goals is to

> Promote greater knowledge and recognition of and respect for the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent, including through research and education, and promote full and accurate inclusion of the history and contribution of people of African descent in educational curricula (United Nations, 2015, para 2).

My research contributes to the goal of broadening and correcting a widespread miseducation about African American women. Because of the study's necessarily interdisciplinary scope, findings have broad implications: public policy, teacher education, social work, religious studies, economics, women's studies, cultural studies, among others.

My goal was to provide a space where African American single mothers could teach outsiders to their world about their self-defined living conditions and self-perceived social position in an attempt to disrupt hegemonic discourse about impoverished African American single mothers. To this end, Faith, Jackie, and Taneya broadened our understanding of life in the margins by functioning as both teachers and curricula.

Update on Faith, Jackie, and Taneya

I have maintained communication with Faith, Jackie, and Taneya since data collection ended. Shortly after Faith gained employment, her car stopped working, and she was struggling to get to work. After using public transportation and depending on friends for rides for several weeks, Faith gratefully received a car from her estranged mother. She was recently recognized as "Employee of the Month" just four months into her new job. Faith and her daughter Simone are doing college tours as they prepare for Simone's senior year of high school and the college application process. Faith is planning a special way to celebrate her 50th birthday.

Jackie has moved from the house that she couldn't afford to a smaller, more affordable townhouse in the same area as her previous home. She shared with me that she no longer receives child support payments (for unknown reasons), so now she's trying to make ends meet with even less income. Jackie now has a significant other and thinks "he'll be around for a while."

Taneya gave birth to a baby boy in early April 2016. She was able to get prenatal care for the last two months of her pregnancy because her Medicaid was reinstated after "a lot of work." Ineligible to receive welfare because she has maxed-out her eligibility (5 years), she continues to struggle providing for her children.

Appendices

Appendix A. Research Questions/Interview Topics Matrix

	Table 1. Research Questions/Interview Topics Matrix					
Interview topics		*Research Questions*				
	1 reality of her condition	2 kind of lifestyle	3 everyday experiences	4 motherhood	6 where does she stand	7 position of Black women has changed
family heritage	x	x	x	x	x	x
health and well-being	x	x	x		x	x
relationships with significant other(s)	x	x	x	x	x	x
socioeconomic conditions	x	x	x	x	x	x
general conditions	x	x	x	x	x	x
religious influences	x	x	x	x	x	x
influences of gender, race, and socioeconomic status	x	x	x		x	x
educational background	x	x	x		x	x
political conditions	x	x	x		x	x
relationships of self to context					x	x

goals and aspirations	x	x	x	x	x	
hobbies and extracurricular activities	x	x	x			
employment/work	x	x	x		x	x

Appendix B. Interview Questions

1. If you have to think of yourself as a place, what would you name be? Why?
2. If you had to draw a map to help someone understand your living conditions, what would your map look like? For example, living conditions might include your shelter, clothing, food, and access to resources.
3. If this paper is your life, who is at the center? Near the margins?
4. This is a map of your city/town, where do you live? Tell me about your neighborhood? Why do you live here as opposed to other neighborhoods? Generally speaking, who are your neighbors?
5. Fill-in this timeline that includes your most significant life events. Tell me about what you're writing.
6. If someone were looking at your life through this microscope, what would you want them to see? Who would you want to be the person looking through the microscope? Why?
7. Using stick figures, draw pictures of individuals in your household when you were 5,10, 20, and now. Tell me about the people you're drawing.
8. Looking at this U.S. map, circle the places where you've lived and draw an emoticon that expresses what life was like living in that particular place.
9. Divide these circles into parts that illustrate how you spend your days, first Monday through Friday, then weekends on the second one.
10. This is an illustration of a mountain and a valley. Write three experiences that you would consider "mountain" experiences and three you would consider "valley" experiences. Tell me about them as you write.

11. Using this pyramid, tell me about your household expenses. Use the larger sections to indicate your major expenses and the smaller sections to indicate your less major expenses.
12. What groups of people in the U.S. are most powerful or have the most privilege? How do you see yourself in relation to those groups?
13. Do you think the status of Black women in the U.S. has improved, stayed the same, or worsened over the last 50 years (1965-2015)?
14. How is your life similar to or different from your grandmother's life when she was your age?
15. Do you think the condition of the Black family has improved, stayed the same, or worsened over this same time period?
16. Over the next few days, using these magazines and other supplies, cut out words and pictures to create a collage that shows who you are or who you aim to be.

Appendix C. Participants (Storygivers)

Participants	**Age**	**Number of Children**	**State of residence**	**Government assistance received**	**Marital status**
Faith	49	4	Texas	Food stamps Medicaid	Divorced once
Jackie	33	4	North Carolina	Food stamps Medicaid	Divorced twice
Taneya	36	7	Alabama	Food stamps Medicaid WIC	Never married

Appendix D. Log of Data-Gathering Activities

Date	Place	Activity	Who	Notes on setting
10/7 (morning)	Participant's home	Interview and Observation	Faith	Faith lives in a two-bedroom apartment in a gated community. Her daughter was at school, so we were alone. Her apartment is clean, neat, and decorated nicely.
10/9 (noon)	Participant's home	Interview and Observation	Faith	Faith's daughter was at school, so we were alone. Her apartment is clean, neat, and decorated nicely. A lemongrass candle created a soft, delightful smell. I observed items that are part of her business.
10/22 (evening)	Hotel lobby	Interview	Jackie	I did not want to invite Java to my room given that she and I had never met. The hotel's office was not available, so we met in a quiet corner in the lobby of the hotel. This worked well. A sitter watched her children.

10/23 (evening)	Hotel lobby	Observation/Informal Interview	Jackie	This observation was supposed to take place at Jackie's home. Jackie had been locked out of her home on this day and was trying to get enough money from friends and family to pay her overdue rent ($2,500). She was optimistic that everything would work out and that she and her children would be back in their home tonight. I met her children and observed her interactions with them.
10/24 (morning)	Hotel lobby	Interview	Jackie	This interview took place the morning after Jackie and her children had spent the night in a hotel room as a result of not securing the money needed to get back in their home. The children were in my hotel room while she and I talked in the lobby.
10/29 (evening)	Participant's home	Interview and Observation	Taneya	Taneya lives in a decrepit two-bedroom mobile home. It is sparsely furnished/decorated and has a foul smell. It is neat and clean. Her three older children are in and out of the living room, and the baby is in her lap.

10/30 (morning and afternoon)	Participant's home Sumter County Probate Office Car Marengo County Courthouse	Observation and Informal Interview	Taneya	Assisting Taneya with getting a government-issued ID First office-we were the only patrons. Attendant tried to assist us with alternatives. 45 minute drive with Taneya and baby Second office-we were among other patrons but got there right after lunch and were the first ones seen. Short visit as our request was refused.
11/1 (morning)	In my car	Interview	Taneya	We sat in the car in her yard for about 20 minutes. This would give us more privacy. A responsible adult watched the children in her home.) She was getting ready to leave for church.
11/6 (early afternoon)	Participant's home	Analysis interview	Faith	Faith had not read her transcripts prior to my visit. We discussed some main ideas I had found during my early analysis. We sat at her dining room table as usual.
12/1 (evening)	By phone	Analysis interview	Jackie	I used the speaker on my IPhone and the voice recorder.
12/12 (morning)	By phone	Analysis interview	Taneya	I used the speaker on my IPhone and the voice recorder.

Appendix E. Categories, Sub-categories, and Codes

Categories, Sub-categories, and Codes

There are 6 categories and 14 sub-categories. The sub-categories fit into categories. The codes are grouped into sub-categories.

1. Living Conditions—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 (These numbers correspond with the sub-categories below. The graphic should show how that these sub-categories fall into this category. Same for the other six.)
2. Lifestyles—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
3. Everyday Experiences—1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
4. Motherhood—1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
5. Individual Status—3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13
6. Status of Black Women—3, 4, 11,

1. **LC—Living conditions** refer to both physical and emotional circumstances. Physical conditions include factors that are a part of participant's life: day-to-day experiences, possessions, needs, and desires. Experiences of particular interest are the ways the participant negotiates resources, handles lack, navigates social services, and survives daily challenges. Emotional conditions refers to affect—the psychological responses to living conditions, emotions such as stress, joy, hope, and frustration, and excitement.

    LCP -physical conditions
        LCP1- perception v. reality
    LCE –emotional/mental conditions
    LCE1 - perception v. reality

2. **CH—Childhood** includes narratives the participant gives about her childhood.

    CHT-childhood trauma

    CHE-childhood experiences

    CHR-childhood relationships

3. **SPP—Self-perception** of position refers to how participant see herself as an individual and as a Black woman in terms of her socio/economic/political status.

    SPPPPV– power, privilege, vulnerability, oppression
    SPPCP– change in position (of Black women)

4. **BSM –-Black single motherhood** refers to mothering experiences as lived by participant, including how motherhood influences her identity, the responsibilities and rewards of single motherhood, challenges to enacting their motherhood ideals, their fears and hopes for herself as a mother and for her children.

    BSMI –identity
    BSMRR –responsibilities and rewards
    BSMC –challegnes
    BSMFH –fears and hopes
    BSMCP –co-parenting with children's fathers

5. **PG—Pregnancies** refers to participant's planned and unplanned pregnancies.

    PGP-planned pregnancies
    PGUP-unplanned pregnancies
    PGU-cannot determine whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned

6. **ISR**—**Intergenerational support/relationships** refers to a network of support extended by familial, female elders and the relationships participants have with their mothers and other female elders in their families.

    ISRM – Support from/relationships with mother

    ISRF—Support from/relationships with father

    ISRGA – Support from/relationships with grandparents, aunts, etc.

7. **SS—Support system** refers to friends, mentors, or other non-familial individuals who assist the participant in any number of ways.

    SSF- support in the form of finances
    SSCC- support in the form of child care
    SSE- emotional support
    SSO- other support

8. **SDID—Self-defined identity** refers to descriptions, definitions, characterizations participant makes about herself.

    SDIDP- self-defined physical descriptions
    SDIDNP- self-defined non-physical descriptions
    SDIDRTO- self-defined in relation to others

9. **RG—Religion** refers to the role of faith, spirituality, church, and God in the participant's life.

RGU-the role of religion is undetermined
RGG-religion serves as a moral guide
RGST- religion as sustenance (source of edification, encouragement, etc.)
RGI- religion as source of identity
RGSP-religion as a parenting support

10. **ABN—Abuse/Neglect** refers to emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse/neglect experienced by participant.

    ABNU -abuse unclear
    ABNE-emotional abuse/neglect
    ABNP-physical abuse/neglect
    ABSX-sexual abuse

11. **ED—Education** refers to ways in which participant has been/is being educated, her views on education in general, and the value placed on her children's education.

    EDP-her personal educative experiences
    EDG-her views on education in general
    EDC-her children's education

12. **MG—Marriage** refers to references to previous marriage(s) and thoughts/feelings about marriage.

    MGP—previous marriage(s)
    MGTF-thoughts/feelings about marriage

13. **WK—Work** refer to tasks participant performs within and outside the home, paid and nonpaid labor.

    WKP—paid work
    WKNP—nonpaid work

14. **PT—Participation** in study refers to participant's thoughts/feelings/effects/questions about participating in the study.

    PTTF-thoughts and feelings about participating
    PTE-effects of participating in study
    PTQ-questions about study

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Education

Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX
Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies, expected May 2016
Certificate in Women & Gender Studies
Dissertation Title: Let Them Teach Us: A Qualitative Study in the Conditions and Position of African American Single Mothers Experiencing Poverty

University of West Alabama, Livingston, AL
M.Ed. in English Education, 1998

Stillman College, Tuscaloosa, AL
B.A. English, 1996

Teaching Certification

Texas Classroom Teacher, English 8-12, English as a Second Language Supplemental

Research and Teaching Interests

Black feminist studies, African-American studies, intersectional feminism, critical race feminism, teacher education, critical pedagogy, curriculum of place, urban education

Courses Taught (Post-Secondary)

- Sex, Gender, and Disciplines, WGST 20003
- Integrating Language Arts Instruction across the Curriculum, RDNG 4309
- Research in Education, EDUC 70953 (co-taught with Dr. Sherrie Reynolds)
- Introduction to the Teaching Profession, EDUC 1301
- Introduction to Special Populations, EDUC 2301
- Child Development, TECA 1354
- Families, School, and Community, TECA 1303
- Wellness of the Young Child, TECA 1318
- Educating Young Children, TECA 1311
- Developmental Reading, RDNG 0361
- Developmental Writing, ENGL 03254
- English Composition I, ENGL 1301
- English Composition II, ENGL 1302
- American Literature II, ENGL 2328

Manuscript in Progress

Gaston, A. (2014). Anzaldúan theories of identity in conversation with Black feminist thought. In revision for *Frontiers Journal of Women's Studies*.

Presentations

National

Gaston, A. (2016). *Let them Teach Us: A Qualitative Study into the Conditions and Position of African American Single Mothers Experiencing Poverty*. Know Her Truths Advancing Justice for Women and Girls of Color Conference. Winston-Salem, NC.

Gaston, A. (2015). *Within the Margins of the Margins: A Qualitative Study of Black Single Mothers Experiencing Poverty*. 2015 Curriculum Studies Summer Collaborative, Savannah, GA.

Gaston, A. (2015). *Gloria Anzaldúa and Black Feminist Thought: Contrasting Theories of Identity*. 2015 El Mundo Zurdo Conference, Memoria y Conocimiento--Interdisciplinary Anzaldúan Studies: Archive, Legacy, and Thought, Austin, TX.

Cravey, A.J., Hillis, K., Dowler, L., **Gaston, A**. & Schroeder, R.A. (2015). *Blue Collar Scholars*. The American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

Gaston, A. (2014). *A Black Feminist Framework for Research and Teaching: A Scholarly Paper*. 15th Annual Curriculum & Pedagogy Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Thomas, C. & **Gaston, A.** (2014). *Increasing the Participation of Women of Color in the Academy: A Dialogue*. Race, Ethnicity, & Place Conference, Fort Worth, TX.

Gaston, A. (2014). *Black Feminist and Womanist Perspectives Used to Theorize a Notion of Place*. Race, Ethnicity & Place Conference, Fort Worth, Texas

Gaston, A. (2014). *De'class'ifying Black Feminism*. The American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (AAACS) Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.

Gaston, A., Calderon, F. Vu, J. & Barrett, C. (2013). *Bridging the Gap Between Home and School Through Community Projects.* 14th Annual Curriculum and Pedagogy Annual Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana

Huckaby, M.F. & **Gaston, A.** (2013). *Voice, Activism & Uprising*. 14th Annual Curriculum and Pedagogy Annual Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Gaston, A., Calderon, F., Powers, T., Barrett, C., Vu, J. & Zhu, M. (2013). *Not Our Home: Desegregation and the Closing of Como High School*. 34th Annual Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice, Dayton, OH.

Local

Gaston, A. (2014). *Still Not a Feminist: Then What Am I?* TCU Women and Gender Studies Graduate Research Symposium, Fort Worth, TX.

Gaston, A. & Calderon, F. (2014). *Coloring Curriculum Studies*. TCU College of Education 2014 Research Festival, Fort Worth, TX.

Gaston, A. (2014). *Collaborating with Community to Enhance Learning*. University of North Texas Equity and Diversity Conference, Denton, TX.

Gaston, A. (2013). *Charter Schools: What Lies Beneath*. TCU College of Education 2013 Research Festival, Fort Worth, Texas.

Gaston, A. (2013). *Teachers' Understandings and Beliefs about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.* TCU College of Education 2013 Research Festival.

Professional Experience

Division Dean Tarrant County College District (TX) 2011-2012

Provided leadership and administrative oversight for a multidisciplinary

division/evaluated full-time faculty/coordinated assessment plan to align with accreditation standards/coordinated class schedules/maintained budget

Full-time Instructor, Education Tarrant County College District (TX) 2007-2011
Introduced students to the field of education through classroom instruction and field experiences/designed curriculum/served as department chair

Full-time Instructor, English Tarrant County College District (TX) 2004-2007
Facilitated students' development in written composition in college-level English composition courses

Teacher, ESL English 8th Fort Worth ISD (TX) 2003-2004
Taught adolescent students to write, speak, read, and comprehend in English

Teacher, English 7th/8th Tuscaloosa County Schools (AL) 2000-2003
Designed and implemented lessons according to state standards to meet the needs of adolescent students/led writing across the curriculum initiative/served as department chair

Teacher, English 7th/8th Bessemer City Schools (AL) 1998-2000
Designed and implemented lessons according to state standards to meet the needs of adolescent students

Texas Christian University Assistantships

Graduate Research Assistant to Dr. Sarah Robbins, Dean of John V. Roach Honors College 2015-2016
Research Assistant to Dr. Bonnie Melhart, Associate Provost/Dean of University Programs 2014-2015
Teaching Assistant to Dr. Molly Weinburgh, William L. & Betty F. Adams Chair of Education 2014-2015
Teaching Assistant to Dr. Sherrie Reynolds, Professor, College of Education 2012-2014

Texas Christian University Apprenticeships

Teaching Apprentice to Dr. Sherrie Reynolds
Course Taught: EDUC 70953, Research in Education

Research Apprentice to Dr. M. Francyne Huckaby
Research Project: Voice, Activism, and Uprising

Fellowships & Grants

Research grant recipient, Center for Public Education 2015
Research fellow, TCU Global Outlooks on Higher Education Institute 2013

Awards

Recipient, Dr. Sherrie Reynolds Memorial Graduate Scholarship 2015
Recipient, Tarrant County College, Chancellor's Exemplary Teaching 2011
Nominee, Tarrant County College, Chancellor's Exemplary Teaching 2010

Honor Society Memberships

Kappa Delta Pi National Education Honor Society
Iota Iota Iota National Women's Studies Honor Society

Professional Memberships

National Women's Studies Association, Member
American Education Research Association (AERA) Division B and Division K, Member
Curriculum and Pedagogy Group, Governing Council

Review Services

Curriculum and Pedagogy Group 2015 Annual Conference—Presentation proposal reviewer
Gender and Education Special Issue, "Theorising Curriculum in Colour and Curves: Black Women with/in Curriculum Studies"—Paper reviewer

Services to TCU and Local Community

Tour Guide, TCU Aspiring Educators College Day Fall 2014
The college day event brings over 100 high school students, aspiring educators, to TCU for a campus tour, class visits, and various activities.

Tutor, TCU College of Education /Paschal Writing Camp Spring 2014/2013
The writing camp tutor prepares Paschal students who are the most at risk in the areas of reading and writing in grades nine through eleven for the STAAR End-of-Course assessment.

Judge, TCU College of Education Regional Spelling Bee Spring 2014
North Texas area students compete in the College of Education Regional Spelling Bee with hopes of advancing to the annual Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. Judge verifies spelling accuracy and attends to challenges.

Facilitator, Scholarship Essay-Writing Workshop Fall 2013/2012

African-American college-bound boys participate in workshop designed to make them aware of scholarship opportunities and to teach them how to craft strong scholarship essays. The workshop is sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Beta Tau Lamba Chapter.

Co-organizer, TCU Women's Studies & American Association of University Women Film Screening Fall 2013
The screening of The Invisible War and panel discussion that followed was designed to bring awareness to the subjugation and sexual violation of women who serve in the US military.

Planning Committee Member, TCU College of Education Green Honors Chair—Dr. Reta Ugena Whitlock Fall 2013
This committee comprised of faculty and students planned the three-day visit of the Green Honors Chair, including public lectures, class visits, meetings with faculty, and luncheons.

ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE MOTHERS AS CURRICULA AND TEACHERS:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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This research study examines the lives of three African American single mothers experiencing poverty. Two aims guide the study: 1) to illuminate their self-defined living conditions and 2) to reveal their self-perceived social position. The first part of the study juxtaposes self-defined realities with externally imposed cultural myths and stereotypes, namely the welfare queen and the matriarch, to reflect the extent to which participants embody and are impacted by the representations. Second, it sheds light on how the participants view their position in the U.S. hierarchy. Life history research was used to describe the individuals' lives as shaped by their contexts in order to get a better understanding of what life is like for an African American single mother who uses government assistance. Black feminist thought, with its emphasis on refuting controlling images and defining a Black woman's standpoint, along with critical race feminism, with value placed on narrative inquiry and intersections of race, class, and gender, provide the theoretical foundation of the study. The findings, revealed in six themes that are woven throughout the narratives, teach us important truths from the lives of the participants in the study. Participants endured traumatic childhoods, view motherhood as central to their identities, function within and outside traditional gender roles, struggle to make ends meet mainly due to un- and under-employment, draw upon religiosity and spirituality to help them navigate the vicissitudes of life, and are not fully cognizant of institutional barriers. The participants function as both curricula and teachers.