

# Africana Mothering: Shifting Roles and Emerging Contradictions.

by

Deidre Hill Butler, Ph.D.  
Africana Studies and Women's and Gender Studies  
Union College, Schenectady, NY

Deidre Hill Butler ([butlerd@union.edu](mailto:butlerd@union.edu)) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology, Africana Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at Union College in Schenectady, NY. She is the guest editor of this edition of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, and presently at work on a book titled *African American Stepmothers*.

This special edition of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, a peer reviewed publication, explores mothering throughout the African Diaspora. The authors examine social, historical, and cultural constructions and reconstructions of mothering; a range of mothering roles; cultural motivations for mothering; and ideologies of mothering. This edition is part of a larger discussion on mothering throughout the Diaspora—or, more appropriately stated, on how mothers enact their roles within contemporary family structures. Historically, African American mothering has taken place both inside and outside of blood relationships, and been intertwined with community and political commitment. Our cultural values are derived from African traditions and the pivotal environmental forces of slavery and global migrations, as well as ensuing economic challenges. Relying on fictive kin or nonblood relations as close-knit family has long been a defining characteristic of family in the African Diaspora.

“Community mothering,” which is linked with the fictive kin model, combines Patricia Hill Collins's idea of “othermothering” and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's description of mothering as a form of community-based political activism (Collins 1990; Gilkes 1980). Collins explains that othermothering “consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African American women experience with one another, with black children, with the larger African American community, and with self” (Collins 1990: 176).

Othermothering is defined as accepting responsibility for a child that is not one's own in an arrangement that may or may not be formal. Othermothering is a foundational component of the black feminist standpoint. This edition enriches conceptions of the black mothering experience, highlights the diversity of Africana mothering, and sheds light on areas that are rarely studied. In "The Lakou System: A Cultural, Ecological Analysis of Mothering in Rural Haiti," the authors explore the cultural response to environmental changes that have moved Haitian mothers away from multiple mothering, where several women in the lakou shared in the caring and supervision of young children, to individual mothering, where single mothers are now the sole caretakers.

"Mothering Children of African Descent: Hopes, Fears, and Strategies of White Birth Mothers" addresses the contributions of non-African mothers of African-other children, adding an important dimension to discussions about the complexity of postcolonial and Africana hybrid identities. This article also explores the responsibility of non-African mothers in fostering children's dual (or multiple) racial and cultural identifications, regardless of their feelings about the fathers of their children.

The process of revisionist Africana family research engages staple definitions of Africana mothering as the glue that holds black families together. However, as Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges, motherhood is a contradictory institution experienced in diverse ways by different women (1990). This contradiction is explored in a contemporary context by Drs. Yvette Getch, Sharon Jones, and Stacey Neuharth-Pritchett and researcher Beth Chapman in "Hear My Voice: An African American Mother's Experience Raising a Child with a Chronic Illness." This article highlights the experiences of well-educated African American mothers raising children with asthma and navigating the healthcare system. Strength and conviction is accessed through a historical lens by Dr. Carol Conaway in "Rhetorically Constructed Africana Mothering in the Antebellum, Racial Uplift Tradition of Mary Ann Shadd Cary," and by Dr. Marci Bounds Littlefield in "Black Women, Mothering, and Protest in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Society." All of these works support black feminist declaration, but also recognize that African American mothering can reside in streams of challenges and isolation. Exploring a wider spectrum of black mothering expands the available areas of understanding and agency for black women. In conclusion, although African families throughout the Diaspora have relied on fictive kin models in most instances, understanding the manner in which Africana mothering is constructed and practiced should also be included in the overall discourse on mothering. Throughout this edition, activist and culturally specific strategies of Africana mothering are presented, expanding an ever-growing canon of information.

## Notes

For further investigation of this topic, also consult *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering in the African Diaspora*, Fall/Winter 2000 issue, Vol. 2.2.

### References

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Denby, Ramona. "Resiliency and the African American Family: A Model of Family Preservation." *The Black Family: Building Strength, Self-Help, and Positive Change*. Ed. Sadye Logan. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1996.

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. "'Holding Back the Ocean with a Broom': Black Women and Community Work." *The Black Woman*. Ed. L. Rodgers-Rose. London: Sage, 1980. 217–232.

Hill, Shirley. *Black Intimacies: A Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005.

James, S.M. "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation." *Theorizing Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Eds. S.M. James and A.A. Busia. New York: Routledge, 1993. 32–44.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer." *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1945–1965*. Eds. V.L. Crawford, J. A. Rouse, and B. Woods. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990. 203–218.

Staples, Robert. *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971.

Steady, Filomena. *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981.