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Seeking Emancipation from Gender Regulation: Reflections on Home Space for a Black Woman Academic/ Single Mother

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Abstract

Using the work of Judith Butler on gender regulation, Black Feminist Thought (BFT), and autobiographic storytelling, this piece illustrates how essentialist notions of gender, and discourses related to gender create conflict in shaping identity construction for a Black woman academic and single mother (BWA/SM) in the United States. This piece reveals complex gendered and racialized tropes related to notions of motherhood and womanhood, particularly within the author's own family. Included here is how the author attempts to transcend these complexities in her quest for self-definition and self-actualization, unbridled by gender norms. Yet, race, gender and parental status are significant intersecting categories in identity construction, and inherent in the constructions are hegemonic discourses with which the author continues to grapple. Consequently, the struggle to transcend these forces is further complicated by the limited representation of Black women in the US academy, and by the types of academic work where they find themselves typically situated.

Keywords: autobiography, black woman academic, single mother, academy, gendereder.

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> A civil society simply cannot afford to force people into false dichotomies and ask that they make *choices* that require them to abjure one if they want the other, or suffer dire consequences if they pursue both. Instead, the focus ought to be on how to design support mechanisms and realistic expectations to enable people to have a fulfilling career *as well* as a family life without paying the price in degrees of sanity or physical health. (Philipsen, 2008, p.33-34).

I am not one of those single faculty women described by Philipsen (2008) who was forced to choose between having a career and having children; or one of those who had to worry about the biological clock versus tenure clock demands. Neither am I one of those married faculty women who had to stop the tenure clock to have babies; nor am I one of those who chose single parenthood when offered an academic appointment because her spouse was unable to find work in the same field (Creamer, 2006; Philipsen, 2008), and I am certainly not one of those women whose martial relationship was strained due to competing academic career paths with one's spouse (Creamer, 2006). My trajectory toward *pursuing* and sustaining a career in the professoriate as a Black woman academic and single mother (BWA/SM) evolved from a complex tapestry of familial, cultural, societal and professional experiences shaped by the intersections of race and gender in the United States.

When I first began to write this manuscript in 2007, many *woman hours* were spent trying to articulate my journey as a Black woman *and* as a Black mother in pursuit of an academic career. Constructing my autobiography proved cathartic, yet daunting was the effort to simultaneously: (a) align my academic voice and personal life with the existing scholarship on Black women in the academy; (b) situate my experience within the scholarship on faculty career women; (c) respond to the feedback and meet the timeline revisions of this then working draft for publication; and (d) prepare financially and emotionally to leave my children in the care of my sister, in the effort to present this

manuscript (a working paper at the time) at a national conference in the US. Ultimately, I was unsuccessful in meeting all those endeavors – my meager salary as an Assistant Professor and the physical and emotional demands between meeting work obligations and parenting responsibilities made it all *near to impossible*. So utterly frustrated and overwhelmed I became that I threw this manuscript in a box and there it would stay. *Until now.*

Homespace, where family life is organized and situated, is a powerful *institution* guided by regulatory norms and discourses that shape identity. Discourses are tied up with power; they have influence on actions, social structures and political and judicial decisions. Discourses are also a product that constructs practices that are present in our society, having an effect on how people act, and what kinds of behaviors are conceived and produced (Alsop & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 88). Thus today I re-read my narrative and think about the structures and discourses that have shaped my family life and career choice and how these structures shape family life and work. You see, the career path I have chosen is merit-based (Knights & Richards, 2003), competitive and demanding. Structurally, the Academy is a space shaped by traditional, Eurocentric, and masculine notions vis-à-vis white male faculty with stay-at-home spouses who support their work (Mason, 2006). Female professors, on the other hand, typically remain single or married and childless.

Research demonstrates the gendered realities of women, particularly how academic life and motherhood are both demanding institutions that require women to be constantly available (Leonard & Malina, 1994; Bracken, Allen & Dean, 2006; Philipsen, 2008), which leads to incredible pressure on women to make one's career the main focus of attention, even with children (Munn-Giddings, 1998; Bracken, et. al, 2006; Philipsen, 2008). Then there are the utterly depressing accounts of academic women who often fail to move up the faculty ranks due to family issues – high rates of separation and divorce, lack of partnerships, and children's needs (Probert, 2005; Philipsen 2008), and outside responsibilities (Bailyn, 2003; Sherman, Beaty, Crum & Peters, 2010). Thus, it is no wonder that many women experience higher levels of stress than men in their academic jobs (Doyle & Hind, 1998).This

balancing act mirrors the experiences of married professional women in other occupations who also experience role or identity conflict (Bell, 1990; Denton, 1990; Davidson, 1997).

A scarcity of narratives reveal the challenges of single Black woman with children. There's Hale's (2001) account about trying to support her child's academic needs, which included her fears about how motherhood threatens to undermine one's status with colleagues (Philipsen, 2008); and in the same edited volume there is the account of "happily divorced" Black woman who expressed relief about not having to juggle the varied roles any longer (p. 101) At the core of these stories is the challenge of role conflict, which is also documented by Gregory (2001) and Covington Clarkson (2001). To further illustrate the strife, there is a particularly telling exchange that occurs in the work of Covington Clarkson's (2001). She shares how after explaining to her three small children that she "would be going to school to become a doctor," her three-year-old asked if she would "still be their mother?" (p. 163). There is poignancy in the simplicity of this child's question! Yet outside of these stories, a huge chasm exists in finding scholarship which elucidates the intersection between the faculty career and family life for Black women, and even more challenging for BWA/SM. *Where is this research? Where are those voices?*

Moreover, Black woman in general, and Black single mothers particularly, have had few spaces to discuss their racialized and gendered experiences. Yet, understanding our experiences is imperative for affirming an increasingly diverse and vibrant teaching and research faculty who can provide students' multi-perspectival exposure to diverse epistemologies, views of the world, lifestyle choices, communities and leadership styles (Nkomo, 1988) that comprise our academic institutions and society; stories that would further knowledge development in interdisciplinary fields such as the social sciences and education. This is important to not only move Black women's experiences from the margins of society, but also to engage in storytelling that promotes awareness of race (Nkomo, 1992) and gender as important points for analysis. Such analysis enables us to gain awareness about faculty work lives and loads, while examining notions of what is normal (Bracken et al, 2006), and *who* is normal. Most importantly, the quality of academic

work life is more than a personal issue, but an institutional one which has implications for scholarly productivity and personal fulfillment (Bracken et al., 2006).

Black Life as a Transformative Research Agenda

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and autobiography (Denzin, 1989) enables me to illuminate how family discourses about gender is embodied within binaries and hierarchies, where notions of motherhood are internally and externally regulated by material and symbolic notions of gender. Because of this, I advocate for women to share private and sometimes painful experiences to create a collective description of the world in which we participate. And autobiography, as a methodology, promotes this opportunity, as it is a genre that connects the personal to the cultural, and places the author within a social context. This reflexivity frees me to look deeply at self-other interactions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), drawing upon highly personalized accounts from my life to develop some cultural understanding. In fact, O'Connor, Lewis &Mueller (2005) reminds me that Black women are not necessarily expected to silence our experiences, thoughts and desires in relations with others; while Hooks (1984) argues for us to construct models of feminist theorizing and scholarship that deepens our understanding of our experiences; asserting that "as subjects, [we] have the right to define [our] own reality, establish [our] own identities, name [our] history" (1989, p. 42). Thus, my gift of double-consciousness (DuBois, 1968) as a Black woman in a society shaped by racialized oppression, along with my critical consciousness as a woman shaped by "double oppression" (Hooks 1989) allows me to evoke my truth in a tradition shaped by scholars like Lorde (1984); Collins, (2000); and Cole & Guy-Sheftall (2003).

Moreover, my positionality was borne from the knowledge that articulating the personal is not just political; it is a revolutionary act when undertaken with honesty and a willingness to interrogate ideas. And life stories are not extant, compartmentalized vignettes only to be shared in the private sphere or relegated as something only worthy of attention in the discourse of popular literature. Rather, truth telling

produces research as a historical, political and moral imperative (King, 2005; Lee, 2005). Stories also connect personal experience with the wider sub-cultural setting in which one is localized, repositioning and elevating subaltern epistemologies, as evidenced in Gilkes (1988); Denzin & Lincoln (2000); Sparkes (2000); Holt (2003); Brown & William-White (2010); and William-White (2010).

Appropriating Judith Butler's 'Gender Regulation': Discourses on Black Womanhood and Motherhood.

I draw from Judith Butler's (2004) essay, "Gender Regulation" to analyze the discourses surrounding Black womanhood and motherhood. Gender regulation functions as a set of social norms and symbolic positions that enables me to examine and deconstruct the notion of gender as a *fiction* embodied through performance. Butler (2004) maintains that people are regulated by notions of what it means to be of a particular gender, and gender is actualized through performance – behaviors and actions that demonstrate one's authorship of a gender identity. As an illustration, the US slave system and Jim Crow segregation gave birth to gender norms that constructed Black women's identity. First, they belonged to historically subjugated groups; they were chattel. Their bodies were property they existed within an economic system where they were denied their basic human rights, not even the right to make reproductive and childbearing choices. Yet, they were also often positioned at the forefront of the Black family and community. For example, efforts to elevate the status of emancipated slaves focused on Black women's social influence, which included indoctrination into Eurocentric social values and traditions of Christian character, submission, and social-responsibility for the uplift of their communities (Shaw, 1996; Collins, 2001).

Black women's gender identity is cemented in a racialized script of gender regulation which embodies performative acts —the preexisting sociopolitical significance of *subservience, service or servitude*. For example, Shaw (1996) documents how during Jim Crow[1] , Black women performed public roles as domestic workers (Dill, 1988) and performed responsibilities "bequeathed to them as woman," that were

centered on the needs of the race (Shaw, 1996, p. 4). In the church, their efforts was shaped by gendered roles of service (Gilkes, 1988). Hooks (1990) suggests that Black women "nurtur[ed] the souls" of the community (p. 41), but were also subjected to a sexist definition of service as a women's "natural" role. Hooks writes:

> …Their lives were hard. They were black women who for the most part worked outside the home serving white folks, cleaning their houses, washing their clothes, tending their children – black women who worked in the fields or in the streets, whatever they could do to make ends meet, whatever was necessary. Then they returned to their homes to make life happen there. This tension between service outside one's home, family and kin network, service provided to white folks which took time and energy, and the effort of black women to conserve enough of themselves to provide service (care and nurturance) within their own families and communities is one of the many factors that has historically distinguished the lot of black women in patriarchal White supremacist society from that of black men (Hooks, 1990, pp. 383-384).

Hooks (1990) states that Black women's primary "responsibility… [was] to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, or sexist domination" (p. 42).

Gender regulation imposes a "grid of legibility on our lives and sets the "parameters" of performance within our social interactions (Butler, 2004, p. 42). Gender is an incessant activity performed with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Thus, that Black women historically have labored within and outside the home to support families is well-documented, but the regulatory fiction that defines Black female identity helped to construct a gendered discourse about who Black women are expected to be at all times, and how she should purport herself. As such, the grid propagates the notion of Black woman in a perpetual struggle for survival and her identity is inseparable from the *need* and *desire* to protect and support the family" (Gregory, 2001, p. 124). There is certainly no refutation here that Black

families have *depended* on the labor of Black women to maintain the nuclear family (which continues to be regulated by white racial dominance in social, economic and political realms in the US). Thus, this dependence enables Black families to persevere and display resilience as these families reject a strict adherence to sex-role designation, which differs significantly to the gender regulation and role construction of white womanhood.

Yet, Black female identity also resides within a unique grid which provides a site for discursive examination. For instance, since the preponderance of Black woman's work historically was resigned to domestic service and childrearing, this helped to anchor Black female identity in a disquieting, American nostalgia, shrouded in the material production of gender through the body. Whether rearing her own or the children of others, uncontested "service" is an accepted attribute of Black womanhood and this essentialist trope endures. Black women's lives from slavery to freedom helped to forge a "trajectory of Black women's bodies as sites of laboring," (Johnson, 2003, p. 104; Jones, 1985). Hurston (1969) too speaks of the Black woman as the mule of the world, further exemplifying the appropriation of her Black body as a moniker of a gendered and racialized being; norms that are historically, socially and culturally grounded. Further, standards of what is *normal* provide a script or *rubric* to evaluate the performance of gender identity. We see this through such ideas as *women* are not supposed to "act" or "perform" *like men* in showing strength, assertiveness or ability in their dimensions of self. However, this expectation has created a long-term struggle for Black women:

> …submissiveness…was never in the cards for us…Whether in the cotton fields of the South or the factories of the North, Black women worked side by side with men to contribute to the welfare of the family. This did not mean that men were demeaned and unloved, but it did mean that women had a voice about the destiny of their families. That independence and resiliency were admired because they aided in the collective survival when society made it difficult for Black men to find work. But when we began to internalize Euro-American values, then Black women were no longer "real" women... (Naylor, 1988, p. 28)

Collins (2004) further substantiates how discourses operate in producing Black women:

> all women engage in an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual White femininity as normative. In this context, Black femininity as a subordinated gender identity becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men…These benchmarks construct a discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women typically are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy (p. 193).

Norms provide a script that adheres to the regulatory powers of gender, and any deviation from the script is measured against those regulations in an effort to normalize what acceptable behavior should be. Butler (2004) suggests that gender norms are "invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms" (p. 52). To illustrate this point, Collins (2004) maintains that Black women are often labeled aggressive and non-feminine, departing from notions ascribed to white women. Another controlling image is the Black women as "super" human or heroic (Wallace, 1978; Collins, 2004), an idea of Black female emasculation propagated in 1930s. There is also the Sapphire-character who is "overbearing, bossy, sharp-tongued, loud-mouthed, and controlling" (Cole et. al., 2003, p. xxxv); and images of the matriarchal, "ball-busting" Black women who competes with Black men are replete in popular discourse. This latter depiction helps to fuel the polarizing discourses that often exist between Black women and Black men due to the "castration" notion, and the perceived dominance that has been stripped from Black men and attributed to Black women (Collins, 1999). These discourses have an enduring history.

Certain positions have universal laws that are subject to unalterable rules. The identity of mother is a worthwhile category to examine as it is assigned and ascribed to the female gender, and holds a symbolic position regulated from inception. Thus, the symbolic position of being a mother holds an esteemed and "quasi-timeless character" (Butler, 2004, p. 45), one understood as a sphere with normalized behaviors and

engagement that is subject to surveillance (p. 56). Motherhood, as a symbolic category, is socially and culturally regulated through the discourses attached to ideals which personify mothering. To illustrate the point, the word *mother* connotes specific gendered attributes, while the concept *to father* tends to be more elusive. To *mother* a child "implies a continuing presence in a child's life" (Rich, 1976, p. 12); thus, the centrality of the mother and her performance of *mothering* by providing nurturance, love, comfort, and demonstrations of sacrifice is a normative conception of the material effects of the act or performance of mothering. Thus, motherhood as a role "has a history, it has an ideology" essential to the patriarchal system, and this identity is deeply internalized in women (Rich, 1976, p. 34). It is a manifestation of women's highest calling, a long-held marker of gender symbolism for White America," (Rich, 1976, p. 158).

Yet, this concept provides an interesting trajectory to examine discursive meanings attached to Black motherhood. Johnson (2003) states that "mother" is a trope that registers in various discursive terrains and is deployed for various aims (p. 104). Thus, social, cultural and historical standards about Black mothers also foster and perpetuate racialized discourses that challenge mainstream notions of mothering. Chambers (2003) states that stereotypes in the media perpetuate the myth that Black females are unable to be good mothers to their own children (p. 62). Black mothers are subjected to critique and ridicule. For instance, Collins (2004) posits that the controlling image of the Black mother is a stigmatized being who rejects feminine ideals and purports herself in negative ways: the bitch who is aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy; the mule who embodies passive-aggressive tendencies; the historic mammy as the *ideal* Black mother who provides loyal service to white people and who cares for white children as her own; the child-like, subservient mother; the promiscuous mother; and the sassy mother (Johnson, 2003).

Recent films such as *Precious*[2] and *The Blind Side*[3] perpetuate the trope of Black mother dysfunction, as both films show the despicable role of mothers who fail to love and adequately care for their children.To further illustrate this point, it is inconceivable that a mother could sexually and physically abuse her daughter; or for a grandmother

silently stand by and watch her *own* daughter psychologically and physically abuse her own children? It is completely unfathomable that a mother would be so disconnected from humanity, and so ignorant of the social and moral imperative to nurture the self-worth of her own children. Yet, the material performance of Black mothering in *these* examples are portrayals of mothers in the previously mentioned films recently awarded Academy award accolades in 2009!

This is poignant because the Black mother is often portrayed as emotionally-detached, or portrayed as the too-strong matriarch who raises "weak sons and unnaturally superior daughters," (Johnson, 2003), a notion further supported by the Black folk expression: "Black mothers *love* their sons and *raise* their daughters." The message here is clear. Her greatest commitment to mothering is for White people, their families, and interests; her care and concerns for her own family are secondary. Then when engaged in the care of her children, the Black mother loves her son to his detriment, and her daughter is reared with a level of unhealthy detachment that produces another generation of mythic, superhuman or psychologically damaged females. Moreover, Black mothers had historically been denied the accolades of parenting, as mothering is what they were expected to do "without applause or special appreciation," (Chambers, 2003, p. 62).

Is this the symbolic position of motherhood that Butler (2004) suggests that are unalterable? Do these discourses support the quasi-timeless and *good-feeling* norms associated with motherhood? Certainly not; thus the Black woman becomes something *other* than this esteemed mother.

The Black family pattern too has been presented as a matriarchal that is unstable and the source of social problems faced by Blacks, (Pickney, 2000, p. 111). For example, although 47% of Black families are headed by Black couples, mothers have the burden of being held responsible for the negative behavior of their children (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 205). Other issues and social ills attributed to Black mothers are high divorce rates and lower marriage rates; higher percentages of children living in "female-headed households; and higher percentages of children living in poverty," (Hecht et. al., 2003, p. 24). Surely, Butler's work does not consider racialized material notions of motherhood. In sum,

the construction of Black women and Black mothers reveal how our identities are shaped by pejorative and archetypical notions not reflected in the multifaceted manifestations of our lives.

Autobiographic Episodes

> The process of becoming begins by confronting certain 'contradictions' in one's life experience, contradictions that alert one's consciousness to the fact that something in social reality is out of phase. The emerging feminist becomes aware that what passes for justice in American democracy is actually a subtle and complex political system that robs her of her autonomy. She discovers that the role she is assigned by her social sphere, woman, diminishes her life chances for fulfillment and happiness. (Cahill & Hansen, 2003, p. 10)

Episode #1: Parenting and the Pursuit of Degrees

Motherhood, for me, preceded *womanhood*. Pregnant as a high school senior, followed by engagement and marriage, I embraced the role of mother and what I *perceived* this role to mean before exploring what life *could* be for me as a woman. My first daughter was born when I was less than a month into my nineteenth year. Early in my first year of *mothering*, my father (a Baptist minister) and a child of the 1940s and 1950s , sent me a Christian-based text titled Woman, Wife, Mother (Harrison, 1991) that spoke of this trinity – the three divine identities of a female "in Christ" and what her role is to be in life. I read this text – not carefully or thoroughly, I must admit. But I did enjoy our conversations with my dad about his ideas about life and scripture; yet occasionally comments would seep into conversation about my pursuits as an undergraduate in college. As a child of divorce, and having not been raised with my father, I looked forward to sharing my life with him as it was developing in my early adulthood.

Two years after my parents' divorce, my mother moved my sisters and me a distant 3000 miles from our father. I was nine-years-old; then from age twelve to eighteen, I visited with my father for only three

extended visits, during vacations. So, it was at that stage of my life, as a wife and mother (at nineteen), that I simultaneously began to create an adult-relationship with my father, and was learning what it meant to be a mother. With daddy, I shared aspects of my new life and my experiences, particularly the day-to-day world of having a new baby, being married, and pursuing my first year of college. All these things were new and exciting; "the possibilities [were] endless" for what I could become (Brown & White, 2010, p. 151). My enthusiasm about all that I was experiencing, doing and learning registered through the phone, I am certain.

And Daddy would listen intently, pause and make comments. But the dialogue would often culminate with statements such as:

1. "Who watches the baby when you are gone? or
2. "What does your husband think about you being away from the home and at school?" or
3. "How is the baby doing with not having you at home?"

I found myself on several occasions trying to defend myself by explaining to Daddy that I was only away three afternoons a week (less than five hours each time); that I would often also take the baby with me to school, or that my husband would also *watch* the baby during the time that I was gone. Of course, the same arrangement was in place when my husband went to school. Though I recognized that the very notion of me stating that I am "watching the baby" for my husband was, in itself, a radical departure from acceptable gender conventions. My dad's questions, and tone, revealed to me how he embraced the "cult of true womanhood" (Zinn, 1997, p. 88), which I felt, undermined my desire for personal fulfillment within academic pursuits, and his words demonstrated to me that he did not fully approve. Though a learned man who held strong values about educational attainment and mobility within our family and cultural community, his ideas about my pursuits were tempered by the greater value placed on the symbolic and social significance of motherhood, and the enormity of that role. Thus, I learned that, for Daddy, my primary identity was mother; self-actualization through education or desire for a career in the Academy

had little to do with his notion of my *highest calling*. From him, I became aware of my gendered reality.

Equally interesting were my experiences with my mother. While growing up, *Mommy* stressed an emphasis on exhibitions of intelligence, creativity, academic ability, rejecting the "cult of domesticity" (Zinn, 1997, p. 87). She took care of the house, and small chores were assigned to my two sisters and me. Our education was most important however. As such, Mommy was adamantly against my having a baby when I announced my pregnancy and engagement at eighteen-years-old. She was then made a grandmother at forty-one and was also attempting to understand and reconcile her own life circumstances and choices as a divorcee, and the subsequent financial and emotional impact of divorce on her, my sisters, and me. Thus, my 'immature' decision to have a child, I think, was emblematic of potential unrealized goals as opposed to being a result of my choices. Mommy married at seventeen-years-old. She, like her mother, became a mother at nineteen and began raising a family, she never completed her college education, so utterly convinced that my life was 'over,' she took all liberties to remind me of my inability to understand the implications of my decision. Thus, on that fateful day when I announced that I was expecting, she spared no words in articulating how motherhood would limit me. Perhaps these comments stemmed from *her story* of not being *supported* by my father to finish earning her college degree because they had children; or from her experiences with independently raising three daughters. Yet, no opportunity was missed by Mommy to ask if I "actually [go] to class" or if I was "still in school," when we would talk on the phone after I moved away to the college community where I resided. Asking how I was doing academically was rarely offered, or was asked as an afterthought. I sensed, through the tension, her words, and her silence, that she was waiting to hear some information that would confirm her belief that I would not succeed as a young mother in pursuit of an academic career. Consequently, at the end of each semester as a demonstration of my resilience and efficacy, I would mail my semester grades to Mommy to show her that I *could* "have it all" (Philipsen 2008, p. 97). I could be a wife, a mother, and successfully meet the demands of the Academy. I wanted her to know that I *did not have to choose* and

that motherhood was only a portion of whom or what I desired to be. I could be: "**Mother *and***…" not *only* a mother. Motherhood is one-part of female process; it is "not an identity for all time" (Rich, 1976, p. 37), and mothers are also people who need "selves of [their] own," (p. 37). Due to this, it was from there I went firmly on the path toward fulfilling my personal trine – my energies were put into trying to be a good mom, a supportive wife, and a budding academic. I guess one could say that I was coming to terms with being young, Black and female (Williams, 2001).

Episode #2: Journey through Matrimony

My spouse and I constructed notions of what our lives would be as a young couple. Though the material roles of being married and of being new parents were neither articulated nor defined, they were embraced and performed by default after we married. We left home for college and to begin *our* lives and family – he and I against the world. He, being raised in a family of twelve children and by a widowed-matriarch, was socialized to be domesticated. I was reared by a mother who elevated embodiments of the mind through educational pursuits and independence (O'Connor et. al, 2005). As such, the arrangement of duties in my marriage mirrored the fluidity of gender-role assignments in Black families (Collins, 2000; 2004; Jewell, 1993). I would function as the nurturer for the family and would assume the role as manager of the household finances and decision making, a role I proudly thought was quite progressive and non-traditional. He would function as the manager of the household needs and would tend to those things that were historically associated with women's work. We were *flipping*[4] the gender script and capitalizing on the areas that we were most comfortable with. And, I was also hell-bent on striving to maintain some gender-balance as it related to our new daughter's care as well. We were both full-time students, so when we brought our daughter home from the hospital at four-days-old, the shared feeding and diapering schedule was already created. My husband was *assigned* early a.m. feedings so I could get more rest, particularly when I had early classes on campus. All in the name of *gender equity*, I thought! He agreed; and

I was pleased. The shared infant care arrangement did not mirror anything that I had seen growing up. It definitely was not my mother's experience, and I was happy that I possessed the ability and will to articulate the need for the balance in our roles.

Yet, my husband, being the youngest son of nine boys, and the eleventh of twelve children was often chided about who "wore the pants" which included discourses about me not knowing my *place*. It was even articulated in my presence that Black women were too demanding and too difficult to have relationships with. These taunts made by my brother-in-laws during family get-togethers were attempts to bait me into polarizing discourses about Black female identity. My brother-in-laws are Baby Boomers – the same generation as *my parents*. We would then have heated dialogues in the living room; my spouse, complicit in his smiling silence, while my mother-in-law, a child of the 1920s, would participate as a laughing spectator. The fraternity culture that I married into, which *posed* as a matriarchal institution, was constituted around sexist, misogynistic cultural ideas and social practices which were problematic for me as a woman.

In addition, these discourses, in my opinion, interfered with what my spouse and I were attempting to do as a couple with the shared goal of completing college while raising *our* family. The irony in all of this is that several of the male family members had pursued some college themselves and several held at least Associate Degrees; a few had or were planning to send their own female children to college, hence educational attainment held value to them. Yet, my positionality was often *critiqued*. No conversation could ensure that didn't involve some reference to me *and schoo*l. I was even dubbed "school girl" by my mother-in-law's sister, and told one evening at a family get-together that my attempts were unrealistic, particularly that I should "get a job" and forget about going to school since I had a baby. *Who would have fed her this information to enable such an unwelcomed conversation and perspective, I wondered?*

And after incidents such as these with my in-laws, I would go home upset, resenting the whole time spent with my spouse's family and resenting my spouse's inaction in these discourses. In spite of all this, however, my husband and our gender role assignments remained status

quo, proceeding without challenge or disruption throughout our undergraduate years in college; though the same could not be said, however, when we relocated our growing family closer to our in-laws when I began to attend graduate school.

I understand on an intimate level when Fordham (1993) suggests that community norms are a major socializing agent in developing and regulating ideas about appropriate femininities, particularly in the regulation of body image, linguistic patterns, and styles of interacting. Female gender sanctions, through a form of sexist-ritualized-hazing, were normative experiences around my in-laws, and any marital discord between my spouse and I became fodder for provocative *kitchen table-talk*. My husband would share with me the stories of how the family would engage in raucous laughter about my facile Standard American English usage and my lexical choices. Mimicry of me through exaggerated diction and 'proper' mannerisms by my mother-in-law would bring the whole house to tears of laughter.

My academic identity, professional mobility, and the prominent position I held in marital financial decision-making was increasingly scrutinized. Never mind, that I worked full-time, went to school full-time on the weekends, having chosen a graduate program that catered toward working professionals; and I arranged *all* care needs for our daughter.. Rather, I was the brunt of jokes and critique instigated by my spouse, and, *at times*, directed towards my spouse *based* on my identity which was constituted around goal-setting, educational pursuits and professional attainment. Additionally, I believe that my identity became a familial signifier – a trope for the sexist, mythical belief of Lisa, as *another* Black woman, who subjugates and marginalizes the Black man.

As I sit and reflect, many of my marital discussions were wrought with landmines centered on my displeasure with my spouse's passivity on varied issues (lack of leadership and vision, employment challenges, financial decision-making, family planning choices), and *his family*. This, in turn, would result in substantial disagreements. My expectation for my spouse was to "man up"[5] . Yet, my perceived "nagging" and "trying to be [his] mother" aided his male privilege and authority to retreat for frequent and extended days to his *mother's house* for what he referred to as "peace" and "comfort" – a place where he still had an open bed.

At the same time, I was gaining a greater sense of purpose and self-affirmation through my academic pursuits – my *escape*. In addition, my employability and student status helped to mediate economic challenges at from – my spouses' low wages; lack equity in the work place, and, at times, poor decision making related to employment choices There were even times when I would use my graduate student status to secure student loans to supplement our financial and family needs when times were particularly taxing. Though my spouse and I both worked full-time, I provided a significant portion of our household income; paid all of our medical insurance coverage costs not covered by my employer, and was paying day care costs (by this time, we had our second child). My husband was working long hours in a menial food-service job, which did not offer a medical insurance plan. In all, I often felt pressured to make things easier at home for my spouse, yet I also felt overworked, ignored, disrespected, and underappreciated at home.

Increased professional accolades provided opportunities for me, though actualized goals were not celebrated in our household as I completed my Master's Degree. In fact, there were instances where my spouse commented that I "act like [I] have an "S" on [my] chest."[6] Or he reminded me that I "needed a man around" more than [I thought]" when I minimized his antagonistic references about his perceptions of my identity. I learned that African American women will continually be viewed as a threat to patriarchy due to the social and economic system that limits opportunities for Black males (Jewell, 1993).

Ultimately, the tension and financial stress began to mount, and helped to shape the eventual emotional and financial withdrawal of my spouse from our family; my attitude and outlook began to shift as well. There were days when I wished that I had married someone who exhibited a healthy attitude about his own *identity*, where my strivings were not seen as a threat, but viewed as efforts to benefit the collective. I also wished, *at times*, that I had married someone who could *provide* for me, where I would be afforded more options and opportunity to immerse in my personal and/or professional life. For example, if staying I desired to stay at home with the children. I often romanticized what life *could* be like if my spouse shared similar professional motivations and similar efficacy to actualize dreams for self-improvement. But most

significantly, I yearned to not argue about family disagreements, about debts, about how his *frivolous* spending when eating out with his *brothers* impacted the financial ledger; and about not spending *any* time with the children and me. And, I grew to *resent* him! I resented my positioning and longed to not carry the burden that came with always having to be responsible for *all* family decisions. I wanted to be a "**Mother *and***…" -- this meant being a mother, a wife, a lover, and an equal partner. Yet, his indifference was palpable. And his lack of motivation to work *with me* correlated with my beliefs in his perceived feelings of low self-worth, combined with the challenges he was experiencing with his personal identity, and professional life. At the end of the day, I lacked the wherewithal and desire to participate in a union that did not support the family – *our* family.

We were eight months pregnant with our third child when my husband and I separated. My spouse moved back home *with his mother*, and I moved back to the college community where we resided as undergraduates. My emotional load was lightened, *I thought at the time*, and I moved forward, dividing my energies between meeting the needs of the children, working, before I relocated my children to another community to attend doctoral study. In the end, I would spend many years of my *married life* living separately from my spouse and as the *primary*, care and financial provider for our three children, until *I filed* for divorce.

Episode #3: "Mothering"

Eight years ago, I sat solo for the third week in a failed co-parent counseling attempt with a Marriage, Family Child Counselor (MFCC) which was focused on how to effectively "parent" and share my children's time with their father. It was in the process of this chat about my family structure, about the developmental needs of my girls (then 9, 11, and 15), and the roles that my ex-husband and I played in their lives, that my worldview was challenged. The MFCC announced that since my ex-spouse refused to participate, our meetings were: "no longer an effort to address co-parenting needs, or parenting at all. We are going to focus on you." *This concept was unfamiliar; strange*.

So when my counselor and I dialogued during that third meeting, she wanted to set some small goals for our time in counseling. *Focus on me? Our time in counseling? This all sounded peculiar to my ear.* But, I knew that I wanted to spend more time being *me*. The MFCC raised a curious eyebrow and then identified a theme that would become the focus of many emotional meetings. I had to sort through and respond to a litany of questions, one being what I wanted to accomplish; who am I today; and, what did I mean by stating that I wanted to spend more time being *me*? I told her that "I am a mother of three girls *and* a single-parent. I am a *Mother, and…"(my voice began to break as tears filled my eyes)…*

(I continue) "…a college professor in a State university. I try to be a good friend; I am a woman of faith, and I am striving each day to be better and to do the right thing by those I love…"

But what did *I really mean* by telling her that I want to be *me*? She challenged me hard on clarifying this statement. I continue:

"My identity has become almost entirely constructed on the role of *mothering*, something that I had struggled with all my adult life…"

Mothering is the cornerstone the historic agentry of Black women in our homes and communities. The act of *mothering* is an embodiment of the social practice in women's lives, and ironically, it is also a major part of my academic work — part of the career expectation which sees us as natural caregivers (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). I knew that over the years, I have honed my mothering skills through various hats as a mother, as a college counselor, as a high school teacher, as a mentor, and as a university teacher-educator. Mothering, supporting and nurturing others was something that I knew well. I knew that I had been able to accomplish goals and create a life for my children, in the material sense, which I did not experience as a child. Most importantly my children have given my life meaning and substance fulfilling me as mother, though there was an absence of fulfilling endeavors, *at times*, outside of *mothering*.

"There are two Lisas – the home and work me *(one in the same; the one engaged in her mothering projects*) and the vacation me -- the Lisa who wishes to hop a plane and get away *from it all* to remember that I am a *woman separate* from having to serve others' needs."

When pressed I found it quite difficult to articulate to another – a stranger—a white professional woman with *no* children, that being a Black woman academic and more so, a single mother is a selfless existence; and, that balancing a career, being the breadwinner and *mothering* is at times heavy-laden. The duties are weighted down by multiple negotiations of time, energy, and personal sacrifice; and one's choices or behaviors may not always meet approval or acceptance. I used the term *rea*l mother because mothers are not made because women give birth. Constructions of motherhood are externally imposed, internally assimilated or rejected, and attempting to comport one's behavior to the regulatory norms is a conscious effort and choice. Some women either forge ahead or embrace the identity; some do not.

Yet, all that I am and all that I have accomplished in life is because of my children, the necessity and desire to provide a life for us, and the personal along with my desire be a "**Mother *and***…", not a mother *only.* The journey has been a labor of love and sacrifice that has kept me and sustained me. Yet, it has also been the source of many tears, frustration, and hardship. So it is true that I romanticize about what life can be like when the nest is empty; and, I pray for the day when all the children have left home and their lives demonstrate that my mothering and sacrifices were worth something that enabled them to grow to be moral and decent women -- women less bridled by intersecting racialized and gendered norms.

The MFCC pressed further still, and asked me to go home and think about all the issues that I struggled to articulate with words. Later that night, with pen in hand, I found my thoughts erupting on my journal page in a heavy rush:

> I find myself attempting daily to do the work of more than one person out of necessity, and the intense desire to have a rich and intellectually stimulating career. This currently translates into me teaching full-time in a graduate program at night, making my life quite involved. For instance, I sit on department and university committees; I am involved in community service in local K-16 schools, where I advocate for educational reform for low-income,

culturally and linguistically diverse children; I attend conferences and I try to cultivate my research and scholarly agenda in a manner that aligns with community and personal interests, while meeting the scholarly demands of the university. Yet, scholarship and curriculum content are areas where Black women find themselves marginalized due to the institutional pressures for them to de-emphasize racial and/or gendered aspects of their research, so this process challenging from my paradigmatic standpoint which is grounded in critical studies and community work, efforts documented by other Black scholars[7].

Often, Black woman academics often have to negotiate how to transcend their own marginalization by reaching out to others for scholarship-building opportunities or mentoringI am the only Black woman in my department, so I function as an advisor to a significant number of Black and non-Black first generation college students who seek support in helping them to navigate the academy. The university demands, in the form of student advising, mentoring, and committee work, further compete with scholarship development, duties which are not heavily weighted in the tenure and promotion process. These duties stand in direct opposition to the value the academy privileges and rewards in terms of research-active, meritocracy-based activities that reflect masculine values and notions of success. Moreover, I give advice on theses; I proofread abstracts for conference proposal submissions and answer students' questions about the content of other professors' course content. I respond to incessant emails; I hold writing workshops outside of work to support those historically underrepresented students who have yet to achieve a convergence between academic language and their voices; and I do a lot of listening and encouraging.

I am also a member of a grossly underpaid faction in my university. Consequently, I teach at another campus during the day to supplement my full-time earnings. Should I have chosen a career in business and industry to better support my family and

> community needs, issues reported in other studies?[8] Moreover, though the professoriate looks like I may have "arrived", Black women are highly concentrated in the lowest academic ranks as non-tenured faculty; have slower promotion rates, and earn less pay than their male and White female counterparts[9]. So I gear up each day for my second job, where I attempt to address the needs of scores of other students. And when "work" is done (I laugh as I write that), I try to make it to my daughters' basketball games, track meets, dance recitals or school productions – at times two on the same night, at different schools. I periodically skip work to make it to "Back-to-School" nights or "Open House" presentations.
>
> And I come home late after a long day at work and proofread my children's papers or correct their homework. I leave post-it notes about necessary changes on term papers. I email my kids teachers to have them more clearly explain obscure homework assignments (after all, I am a teacher-educator). I also drop off forgotten lunches to the school front offices. I chauffeur and carpool for events. I cook dinner most mornings before work and leave directions for reheating. I would stand over my children on weekends to make sure they get their chores done. And I still managed to bake or buy cupcakes on birthdays for the girls to share with classmates; buy birthday cards and presents for buddies' weekend parties. I pull out tools to fix flat bicycle tires and curl tresses for school pictures and dances. I even make midnight runs to the nearest 24-hour "we-have-it-all store" to pick-up forgotten supplies for school projects. I do it all! And to be honest, sometimes I do not do it all very well. Sometimes I do it begrudgingly. And sometimes, now and then, it all gets a little overwhelming. I feel like I exist only to serve others.

I read over my list with an incredible sense of sadness overtakes me. *Didn't I choose a professional career in the academy to bring me personal fulfillment beyond the home sphere and mothering? Didn't I pursue the professoriate to not succumb to the regulatory fiction of*

gender – of Black women's work involving gendered roles of mothering, service and servitude?

Conclusion

As a BWA/SM in the academy, my pursuits present conflicting desires about what I want for myself, for my career, and for my children, creating role strain related to my effectiveness in those various roles. This strain is often exacerbated by the individualistic demands of the academy, the duties connected to working with students and within my cultural community, and being the sole provider for a family. However, the constant between these varied roles, however, is the gendered task of *mothering*. The performance of mothering and its rituals combined with the daily performance and negotiations of multiple, conflicting realities create a push and pull. And I do not move through the day with the mythic, unscathed resolve articulated in the discourse about Black womanhood or motherhood. At times, I am sensitive about the continuous barrage of ever-shifting discourses that accompany the multiple spaces I inhabit. I am a mother *and*; but, my life is also more than *mothering*. Moreover, the performance of mothering is, at times, a thankless job. Ironically, this very statement threatens the politics embedded in gender and the symbolic position attached to Black women who are mothers. So, it becomes politically, culturally, and morally incorrect to make my previous statement without the subordinate statement of "motherhood being something that I am also thankful for."

One's sense of survival depends on escaping norms by which recognition is given, while recognizing the tension in becoming estranged from those same norms. Consequently, though I may desire to transcend the grid of legibility that defines gender norms, I have to validate the existence of that same grid that regulates and governs behavior. Thus, the act of rejecting externally imposed regulations can either threaten my identity, or it can be a liberatory act in demonstrating the various shades of what it means to "be". Thus, the paradox lies in the negotiation between these dichotomies. Moreover, an additional contradiction for me is that to voice frustration and discontent with the regulatory fiction of Black womanhood and motherhood is to also run

the risk of drawing criticism about my ability to adequately meet my many obligations, as opposed to viewing my experience as a critique of hegemonic discourse and ideological systems that regulate me, and others like me.

Gender is held captive to representational identities and norms that are contradictory and problematic. Therefore, we must examine the "life" of gender, one's own perceptions and expectations, as well as that of others. What it means to be a mother is a social construction; attributes of motherhood and acceptable performances of mothering are not innate, but are reflective of regulatory norms and symbolic roles created from social and cultural norms. No one can fulfill these confining ideals, and people must not look at these *fictions* as *ideals*. Rather, my story is an act of will to subvert gender normative and racialized standards to affirm myself, particularly as it relates to what I want to be recognized for, achieve and fulfill. This supports Butler's (2004) idea that a person seeks to be recognized for oneself, separate and distinct from binaries constituted by norms.

Coda

As I reflect on my experiences in 2012, I now understand why this manuscript could not be completed many years earlier. Not only was my energy not there, but the attempt was *premature*. I lacked clarity about my own lived experiences, and about my writing purpose for a story yet *undone*.

I now write this *fina*l note three days after Mother's Day. Less than 24 hours ago, I was presented with the 2012 Distinguished Alumna Award based on my academic record and commitment to education in my community. An incredible honor it is to receive from the Dean of my doctoral alma mater. When I first matriculated there, I was filled with such uncertainty about what I was attempting to do. I find myself over swept with unexpected emotion as the Alumni Chairperson reads my personal biography. *Here's why*:

Two days earlier, I watched my oldest daughter walk across the stage at her undergraduate commence ceremony (from *my* undergraduate alma mater). She, at age 23, will matriculate this fall into graduate school on

the West coast. My middle daughter graduated from high school a year earlier and is currently attending a top-tier research university in the mid-west. And, less than 24 hours ago, I watched my youngest child graduate from high school. She will matriculate to a major research institution in the central Pacific to study this fall.

And yes, it is all *surrea*l, but no fairytale is illuminated here! However, as I reflect, I am filled with joy and resolve. Thus, upon listening to the Alumni Chairperson read my biography, which included a list of my "accomplishments", I come full circle and am most proud when she says, "And, she is ***also*** **a Mother**."

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Notes

1Legal segregation of Blacks from White society following the emancipation of enslaved Blacks.
2See http://kempefoundation.wordpress.com/2010/03/08/precious-wins-two-academy-awards/
3See http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/82/nominees.html
4Reversing preconceived gender roles.
5Demonstrate leadership.
6A reference to the superhero called Superwoman whose abilities had no limits.
7Gilkes, C. T. (1983). Going up for the oppressed: The career mobility of black women community workers. Journal of Social Issues, 39, 115-139.
8See Gregory, 1999; Teevan, Pepper, & Pellizzari, (1992).
9See Gregory (1995).

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