

OF MULES AND PEARLS:  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK SINGLE MOTHERS

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Communication Studies  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2012

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## ABSTRACT

Most research on Black single mothers focuses on the quantity of Black single mother headed households in the Black community as opposed to the true quality of life that Black single mothers provide for their children. This study, which includes five interactive interviews and autoethnographic reflection by the author, focuses on the ways that Black women self-define as single mothers and reimagine their family dynamics in the wake of White pseudo-traditional family standards.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother Ksenia, the first Black single mother I ever met. Although we only spent the first three years of my life together, your absence has shaped me in a way that you could have never imagined. I also dedicate this thesis to my son Kody who is the reason for my heightened sensitivity to my obligations as a mother, woman, and human. I also want to dedicate this thesis to my fiancée, Freddie, thank you for your undying support during my preparation for this manuscript, you are certainly appreciated beyond your own understanding. I love you dearly. Finally, to Gramma, thank you for your sacrifices over the years, I would not be who I am today had you not been who you are since we met in 1987.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am pleased to have the opportunity to thank my colleagues, family, and friends, and members of the faculty that have contributed to the things I have learned while completing this project. I would like to thank Dr. Beth Bennett and Dr. Mary Meares for their encouragement during my pregnancy and journey to complete this manuscript.

I would like to acknowledge the members of my thesis committee individually. To Dr. Robin Boylorn, it all started with your presentation in my COM 500 class. You inspired me to tell my story in a creative way. This was the day that I fell in love with your spirit and your genius and the day I decided you would be my friend forever. Thank you for everything. There are not enough words in the English language to accurately describe what you mean to me.

Dr. Brittney Cooper, you are the crunkest Black feminist I know and this thesis would not have been the same without your wisdom and your genius. Thank you for encouraging me to rethink the ways in which these narratives were positioned. Your advice made all the difference for me. You have been so necessary through this entire process. Thank you.

Dr. Jason Edward Black, our history together goes way back, and you have been so instrumental in my development as a writer and as a humanist. In fact, you are the reason I decided to continue my education. You are truly amazing and none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for your advice and for also helping shape and reimagine my personal narrative for this project. Thank you.

The journey to completing *Mules and Pearls* has been long and resilient. I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge two of my previous participants who were displaced during

the tornado on April 27, 2011. Wherever you are, I am sure you are exercising your God given resilience. I also thank each of the women who were brave enough to tell me all their personal business to prove that our own definitions of self are the only ones that really matter.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **“Chile Please”**

If I close my eyes, it feels like yesterday. It all happened so fast. My body wasn't feeling right. I had always been in tune with my body, but at this particular point, my body was unfamiliar. I felt heaviness in my breasts, but they looked the same. I felt a quickening in my womb, but my stomach was still flat. I thought to myself “what the hell is going on inside of me?” I bought a home pregnancy test for reasons that I cannot explain. I never felt sick, but my cycle was four days late. I was not exactly worried because I was late, because it was only a few days, but I felt different, like I was sharing my body with someone else.

It seemed like this other person was making a home for themselves inside of me. I didn't share my suspicion of pregnancy with anyone, not even the love of my life. I peed on the stick and it only took one milli-second before those two lines popped up as if to say, “Chile please, your ass knew better than to be pissing on a stick. You know you're pregnant!” I sat on the toilet stunned, so stunned that I began to laugh.

It was exactly one week before graduation, I had just been accepted into graduate school at The University of Alabama, and I was pregnant. I left the positive test in the bathroom for Freddie, my boyfriend of three years, to see when he got home from work. He was happy about the news. I, on the other hand, was numb. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't sad either. I just... was.

The thought of me walking around with a swollen belly, no wedding ring, and an empty promise of marriage was startling. Freddie and I had talked about getting married after I graduated when we were both settled into the real world, but those were just words spoken

between lovers. We talked about our future, but the promises were empty, uncertain. Now, unexpectedly and unintentionally we created a life between us. With a positive pregnancy test I did not take any comfort in the promises that we made because I had no ring, and no way of knowing if things would really unfold the way he said they would. What I did have was a baby on the way. Although I knew there were no guarantees about the future of my relationship, and this frightened me, I also I knew I had the tools my foremothers gave me to be resilient in the face of my fears and to be the best mother I could be.

My biggest fear was of being another statistic: a poor Black single mother who is inadequate and incompetent. Even though I knew I had a degree to fall back on I was not certain if my degree would open doors for me to be financially comfortable as a single person, and I was even more uncertain about that now that I was about to have a child. I didn't want the stigma of a Black single mother nor did I want to prove negative depictions of Black single mothers true.

Given my circumstances, I was determined to defy the stereotype that expected me to be a poor, Black, single, mother who relied on the government to take care me and my child. I would make different choices and redefine what it meant to be a Black single mother, but first I had to face my family. What would my God-fearing conservative grandmother think of this? I knew she wouldn't like it. Gramma feared God and I feared her.

Since Gramma feared God, she made sure I always knew what His Word said about life. One thing in particular she harped on was fornication (the act of pre-marital sex, which God views as a sin). I knew what God said through His Word, but I was more afraid of disappointing Gramma than I was of disappointing God. In Gramma's eyes, being pregnant before being

married was the genesis of the single mother struggle. It meant that I would continue having babies without being married and my chances of getting married were marginal. It meant that I would never live up to my full potential because I would always have to be worried about someone else. It also meant that I would inherit the burdens of being female, Black, and a single parent. After all, it happened to Gramma, it happened to my mother, and now it was happening to me.

The only difference was that my mate did not leave me, or show signs of his plan to escape when I told him I was expecting our first child. My grandfather was not the kind of man who would do right by my grandmother. The stories I heard about his departure did not surprise me. I have always been aware that love can be a tumultuous adventure, but I also knew the adventure did not always have to be tumultuous. Prior to his passing in January of 2011, my grandfather, who I affectionately call Paw-Paw, expressed the reasons his marriage with my grandmother did not work. According to Paw-Paw, my grandmother thought she was better than him. He claimed she was emasculating and afraid to let him be the man of the house. I translated this to mean he was jealous of his wife because she took the time to educate herself and he felt threatened when she attempted to make decisions based on her knowledge and wisdom.

After hearing his feelings about Gramma tearing their marriage apart with her education and emasculation it became clear to me that their marriage never really had a chance to survive because Paw-Paw was not willing to accept his wife's independence and abilities outside of who she was with him. It has always amazed me that Paw-Paw blamed Gramma for the demise of their marriage up until the day he died. Gramma's journey into single motherhood eventually

shaped my mother's journey. My mother was 16 years old when she got pregnant with me. From what I hear, my father was seven years older than her and not interested in taking care of his responsibilities. Everything I knew about raising a baby without a husband told me that I would have to face it alone. Yet somehow I feel that my journey through motherhood would be different.

Although I feel that I am on my way to becoming one of the few women in my family who won't be participating in our tradition of single motherhood I cannot forget the hard work that I have witnessed from my grandmother, my aunts, and even my own mother. These women worked extremely hard to create safe spaces for their families but didn't always get the recognition they deserve. I feel that I am able to empathize with them because I was raised in a single mother headed household and I was unmarried for the first year of my son's life. I also know that there is more to their stories than broken hearts and unforeseen hardships.

### **The Mule of the World**

I have watched my grandmother, aunties, and friends pray and grind as hard as possible to create a sense of normality for themselves and their children in the face of abnormal circumstances. Not only did they sacrifice their own desires for the betterment of their children, but they made these sacrifices alone. This always captured me emotionally because I never understood how it took two people to create a child, yet there was always one woman doing all the work. The perpetual image of Black women and burdens is most clearly offered and often referenced in Zora Neale Hurston's book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/2006). In the

book, a Black matriarch, Nanny, describes Black women as the ultimate burden barriers. In a conversation with her granddaughter, she says:

So de white man thrown down de load and tell de nigger man tuh 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 far as Ah can see. Ah been prayin fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (p. 21)

A mule is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse that is often preferred by operators of working animals because mules show more patience under the pressure of heavy weights on their backsides" (Collins 2003, p.367).

According to Hurston (1937/2006) the Black woman is the mule of the world because she possesses the same attributes as the mule, but the value of her humanity is seldom considered.

Similar to the mule, Black women are overexerted and underappreciated. Collins (2008) describes laboring mules as "dehumanized objects that blend in with the scenery" (p.45). Collins' definition of a mule links to my study because it demonstrates the idea that Black single mothers, through societal oppressions and negative stereotypes, are often ignored and treated as insignificant beings. Based on the things I have seen and experienced, I agree with Hurston. As a Black woman, battling hegemony is all in a day's work, but battling hegemony with a baby in my arms is quite an interesting challenge. I have to protect my baby with every ounce of myself while my race and gender barely position me to protect myself.

My self- knowledge as a Black single mother comes from things I experience every day. I am interested in the different ways that other Black single mothers learn and know how to be

good mothers in the face of social critique. I suspect that the ways many Black single mothers engage in epistemology is through balancing their responsibilities with their oppressions by simply living and experiencing life. In this thesis project, I collected and compared the experiences of five Black single mothers with my own in order to better understand how Black single mothers communicate about their experiences.

This research seeks to use autoethnography and interactive interviewing to narrate the stories Black single mothers tell about their individual journeys through single motherhood, romantic relationships, familial relationships, and relationships with other women. The subsequent pages contain a literature review, the methods used to conduct research, the narratives and analyses of five Black single mothers' experiences and my own, and a conclusion of all findings. First, I will review available literature on the experiences of Black single mothers and the historical implication on the Black family. Next, I will discuss the methods I used to complete this study using autoethnography and interactive interviews and explain why I feel it is important. I will also explain how this project can contribute to the literature that already exists about Black single mothers. Then, I will present the data obtained from the research in narrative form and provide an analysis for each story told. Finally, I will conclude by establishing how this study has contributed to a sophisticated understanding of Black women's lives as single mothers and how they communicate about it on their own terms.

Black women are one of the most silenced groups in society as race and gender both amplify and disqualify their voices. Harris (1982) argues that "the Black American woman has to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt

qualified to explain her, even to herself” (p.4). My goal with this study is to ensure that at least a small population of Black American women has the opportunity to explain themselves without interference from outside sources.

The history of family dynamics leads society to portray Black single mothers and their families as deviants. The status quo, by which everything is compared, is rooted in marriage and exceptional socioeconomic status. These standards paint the picture of the supposedly perfect American family and due to the exclusivity of these standards, not everyone fits into this picture, especially minorities.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **The Traditional Family Myth**

The perfect American family embodies what scholars refer to as the “traditional family myth” (Nicholson, 1997). The ideas that a family includes parents who are married and have a high socioeconomic status out of moral obligation to their children are major themes in the traditional family myth. The ideas of tradition are extremely demanding of people who desire to fit into the tradition and devastating for people are viewed as the alternative to the tradition. According to Nicholson (1997) “the categories we have for organizing families--particularly the language that sorts them into “traditional” and ‘alternative’ ones-- make too many of us ashamed of the way we live” (p. 27). What is most intriguing about American families participating in this myth is that this myth did not emerge in America. Nicholson (1997) states that “the most basic features of the traditional family being two heterosexual adults raising children emerged out of certain transformations in social life occurring in Western Europe which were later adopted in North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p.27).

Traditional American families were at their peak during the 1930s and 1940s as the ideals of the traditional family began to change after World War II. Two parent households for American families increased post war as many couples valued their relationships more after the Great Depression. During this time economic prosperity was back on the rise, the housing market was doing better, and families began to focus more on the nuclear family rather than the extended family which included grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins (Nicholson, 1997). The

change that took place during the post war period proves that traditions change with time, yet certain individuals are penalized when they are the alternative to traditional values.

### **The Problem with the Traditional Family Myth**

The traditional family myth is used as a metric of personal success and when individuals fail to meet the metric they are penalized and ridiculed. According to Gillis (1997) the traditional family myth is a tool used to control people's actions, specifically women, making them feel immoral if they do not align with the myth. "The idea of tradition is a modern phenomenon that reflects a desire for custom and routine in a world characterized by constant change and innovation. A reverence for the ways of the past has become so strong that when traditions do not exist they are frequently invented to create family values." (p.3)

Family values are important but similar to the tradition that inspires the values, they change with time. Gillis (1997) argues that families of the past are presented to us as more stable and authentic than the families we see today because families in the past were centered on fathers being present in the home, breadwinners, and burden bearers of their family's needs. Mothers were being supportive of their husbands and caretakers for their children, while being childlike themselves. Families in the past were rooted in traditional gender roles that do not apply to all families and specifically not Black families. Gillis (1997) acknowledges that when we speak in terms of tradition and compare the image of family presently to a specific place and time in the past, we immediately begin to describe the family in terms of lack, decline, and loss. Jewell (1989) suggests that if a White single mother is ever the alternative to the traditional family myth

she is looked upon with pity and sympathy whereas a Black single mother is viewed as deviant operating in a dysfunctional family unit.

### **From Africa to America**

The Black family was not always viewed as dysfunctional. The origins of Black heritage are mostly credited to Africa. Many Africans had their own traditions and family values. African societies were organized and united through tribe, family and household prior to slavery. African men did not view their women as subordinates, they viewed them as partners who took care of the home while they went to hunt and make their livings. According Mbiti (1992) in many West African households, husbands and wives shared domestic responsibilities (p.43). The family dynamics in many African villages extended beyond the nuclear family. African families included husbands, wives, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and many cousins who all provided assistance to one another in times of need (Mbiti, 1992).

These family dynamics were satisfactory to Africans, but viewed as barbaric to Europeans who were looking to establish life in the United States of America. Since Africans were viewed as barbaric and subhuman they were used as property during chattel slavery in the United States and forced to participate in things that were contrary to the family values they created for themselves in Africa. Families were separated on plantations. Slave men and women were used as breeder tools to produce children to continue the institution of slavery.

During slavery, the Black family was not recognized as a legitimate institution and it made White people believe that their idea of family was the epitome of what the Black family should be (Omolade, 1987). This belief created unrealistic norms and the institution of slavery

placed Black families in positions that guaranteed that they would never fit into the norms.

According to Omolade (1987), “Black single motherhood began as a viable family type which Black men and women adopted in response to a system which did not recognize their right to a legal marriage and family” ( Omolade, 1987 p. 240). The institution of slavery makes the Black family’s experience unique in comparison to any other race of families in U.S. History because slavery positioned the Black family outside of the norms. Although many minorities’ histories have been rooted in brutality at the hands of White Americans, Black people endured physical and psychological abuse for more than two hundred years (Meltzer, 1993).

As mentioned in the previous section, Black families had their own family dynamics prior to the institution of slavery and these dynamics were shattered due to the ways in which slavery dissected Black households. During the dissection of the Black household husbands were sent away and Black women were left behind and often brutally beaten and raped with no one to protect them. The lack of protection from this brutal physical abuse, although involuntary, created a disconnection between many husbands and wives during slavery (Meltzer, 1993).

### **Black Family Dysfunction**

After slavery, it was commonplace for Black women to be single mothers as their previous family dynamics had been taken from them. Black men were learning how to maneuver in society post-slavery and did not have as many opportunities as women which caused a greater disconnect between husbands and wives. Many husbands were envious of their wives’ ability to make a living after slavery. These disconnects made Black women post slavery notice the

constraints they faced. Black women had the pressure of sexism, racism, classism as well as accusations of emasculation hovering over them while attempting to be providers for their families. Although Black women were free from slavery, they were still treated as less than human. The jobs that were available to them were degrading as many of them had to clean the houses of White people and work in their kitchens (Beale, 1969).

According to Beale (1969) the hard work that Black women had been doing since the end of slavery and their husbands' lack of ability to find work eventually tore the Black family apart. Beale argues that Black women were manipulated by the system and economically exploited and made to believe that the men in their lives were "shiftless and lazy" because they did not have jobs to support their families (Beale 1969 p.1). Although traditional gender roles do not typically apply to working class Black women because they have always had to work to provide for their families, this type of independence was viewed as threatening to many husbands who decided to leave their wives. This is where literature about working class Black mothers can be misconstrued because it paints the picture that Black women emasculated their men by being the breadwinner and forced them to leave in order to recapture their manhood. Black women were blamed for altering their household dynamics by taking on less traditional gender roles even though slavery left them no choice. The responsibility of slavery's hand in creating Black family dysfunction was often trivialized to make Black women responsible for the reason Black men left home.

## **The Moynihan Report**

No one found the Black woman guiltier of ripping out the heart of the Black family more than Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan was the Secretary of Labor in the United States in 1965. As a sociologist, he conducted a study on the issues that contributed to the oppression of Black Americans. His report became known as The Moynihan Report (Moynihan & Kolenberg, 1998). During the time this report was written there was an increase in Black poverty in the United States and due to Moynihan's position as Secretary of Labor he used the statistics to highlight what he thought was the root to the Black poverty in Black families: Black women.

According to Moynihan (1965), matriarchal Black women who were the breadwinners in their families reduced their husbands' value in the home and caused their husbands to leave.

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is 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 a great many Negro women as well.

(sec.4. 28)

Moynihan (1965) argued that Blacks faced a disadvantage because they were perceived as deviants who were incapable of civilization and headed for a definite demise if their family structure included female dominance as opposed to male dominance.

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one

principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. (sec. 4. 26)

Moynihan believed that if Black women adopted the more traditional gender roles of White women, they could mend their broken homes as well as make their men feel useful again and receive identical rewards and advantages as White families. The flaw with Moynihan's report is that he did not take into consideration the different circumstances that Blacks and Whites experienced in the 1950s and 1960s.

Black women did not have the luxury of being a home maker. Career opportunities for Black men were quite scarce, so this eliminated many choices Black families had as it related to traditional gender roles. The circumstances during this time gave Black women the options of either feeding their children or stroking their husband's ego. If Black women would have done the latter, Moynihan's report would have forecasted negligence at the hands of mothers to satisfy their husbands (Beale 1969).

### **In Response to Moynihan**

Dixon (2006) states that there are two approaches to understanding African American relationships, marriages, and families: the adaptable approach and the deficit approach. Those viewing Black families through the adaptable approach argue that Blacks adapted to their circumstances and their marriages and families have been resilient in the wake of interferences to their existence. Dixon (2006) states:

Someone like Daniel Moynihan, whose argument is that strong Black women dominate the men in their lives and cause them to desert their families uses the

deficit approach when attempting to understand Black marriages and families.

The deficit approach compares African American families to the nuclear family model of the United States and find them to be deviant, and in some cases pathological. (p.5)

The Moynihan Report is still discussed today to measure the current state of the Black family. In 2010, MSNBC conducted an investigation to do a modern day comparison of the numbers Daniel Moynihan gave in his 1965 report. Moynihan found that the number of White women heading single family households was 4 percent and the number of Black women heading single family households was 24 percent in 1965. In 2010, the number of White women heading single family households is 29 percent and the number of Black women heading single family households is 72 percent. (Washington, 2010) Lucas and Harper (2009) argue that “with the numbers of Black marriages decreasing 31 percent since 1996 the Black family is in a crisis. With less Blacks marrying, many Black children are growing up in single family homes and only 38 percent of them actually grow up with both parents” (p.119).

Although there may be many Black families who still want to attain the traditional family norms, there are others who understand that these norms were not created for them. These percentages paint a picture that the Black family is still not equipped to be America’s traditional family that consists of a wife, husband, and children, but it also raises the possibility that the Black family is not trying to be America’s traditional family. After African family dynamics were uprooted by slavery many traditional Black families included mothers and children with

additional family members or friends who provide additional support in the absence of fathers.  
(Omolade, 1987)

### **What Happened to the Black Men?**

In popular culture Black men are often portrayed as angry and inferior, not only to white folks, but also to Black women. Much of this type of portrayal of Black men can be accredited to the seeds sown through the institution of slavery. Franklin (2000) argues

There is no question that slavery had a devastating impact on the Black man's psyche. The personality traits associated with being a- "good slave"- were diametrically opposed to the West African concept of manhood. The primary characteristics of manhood in West Africa were bravery, fearlessness, and gallantry, and West African communities were very clear about how a male should comport himself. (p.30)

Black slave men could not live up to dynamics of their West African culture while they were on plantations. On some plantations they were husbands and fathers, but due to the dynamics of slavery, they were not permitted to perform their husbandly and fatherly duties of protecting and providing for their wives and children. Being separated from their families and being helpless in their times of need created a psychological rift in the psyches of Black men between who they were and who they were supposed to be. The rift that caused the disconnect for Black men also placed Black women in positions to take on responsibilities that are often depicted as alternative and masculine.

## **The Negative Ideologies of Black Single Mothers**

The idea of a single Black mother is plagued by tainted images of her race, gender, and class. Collins (1990/2000) describes these tainted images as controlling images. These images are tools used by outsiders to place Black women in matrices that are oppressive.

The controlling images of Black women attempt to limit them to mammies, matriarchs, Black ladies, jezebels, and welfare queens (Collins, 1990/2000 p. 70). The mammy is an emasculating asexual mother who is humble and obedient in regards to the wishes of her White slave master. The matriarch is an emasculating, asexual, bad mother, who is hostile and often verbally aggressive. The Black lady is usually middle-class, educated, but she is unsuccessful in maintaining relationships. The jezebel is the promiscuous, insatiable black woman who has nymphomaniac tendencies. The welfare mother is a poverty stricken Black woman who is a new version of slavery's breeder woman. She has children for the sole purpose of maintaining her government assistance with no intention of ever learning to support herself (Collins, 1990/2000). Each of these images greatly limits the Black woman's ability to be considered a good mother because they each are rooted in negative behavior that make it impossible to raise children without dysfunction. These images are so negative that they necessitate a rebuttal from Black women. This is why my study is necessary because it will provide my participants with an opportunity to show how and why it is important for Black women to self-define in the wake of these negative oppressive images.

The controversy that taints the image of the Black single mother lies in society's acceptance of controlling images as accurate depictions of the Black single mother. The images

are pervasive because they are the most dominant images shown of Black single mothers. Black single mothers are rarely depicted as adequate individuals capable to creating a family dynamic that is not dysfunctional. According to Sands and Nuccio (1989) “a disproportionate number of women who head single-parent households are Black and poor” (p.25). Sands and Nuccio (1989) argue that the Black single mother’s experience is unique in comparison to other races because there are a number of factors working against Black women to keep them dependent upon others, including racism and classism. Not only does the double jeopardy of Blackness and womanness amplify the Black single mother’s experience, but classism prevents Black women from moving forward financially because all of their needs as well as their children’s needs are not met, which in turn causes a dependence on someone or something just to get by.

### **Welfare: Us and Them**

In many cases the major economic problems some Black single mothers experience cause them to live codependent lifestyles with the government or other family members as their provider. Welfare recipients are typically viewed as the have-nots amongst a society of people who view them as inferior and impoverished. Although government assistance is available, women, Black women especially, are often criticized for accepting it because accepting government assistance embodies the controlling image of the welfare queen discussed earlier as well as accusations of inadequacy.

Crooms (1995) states that “demonizing single motherhood and welfare encourages one to think of these mothers as “them” and not “us” and to contemplate policies for “them” that “we” would never consider for ourselves or our children is inhumane” (p. 615). Depictions of

Black single mothers on welfare are always so negative that it is hard to view welfare and other government assistance programs as a strategy for raising children. Not every woman has the same tools and opportunities, so each mother has to provide for her family differently.

According to Crooms (1995) “such women, at worst, are viewed as a menace to society or as a public enemy. At best they are viewed as sociological cripples whose crutch—welfare—must be knocked out from under them if they are to learn to walk” (p. 615). Knocking the crutch from under them includes, but is not limited to, preventing them from continuing to have children who are products of mother-headed households.

Collins (1990/2000) argues that at the time it was administered, welfare gave Black Americans an alternative to the degrading jobs that their ancestors had to take because it provided a source of income without having to actually work. The problem with the welfare mother, according to Collins, is that she is not aggressive enough. She seems to be content not working and having the government take care of her, and this makes her a bad teacher to her children because she is instilling in them that work has no value.

Roberts (1994) suggests that “the image of the lazy Black welfare queen who breeds children to fatten her allowances shapes public attitudes about welfare policies” (p.873).

The controversy regarding the acceptance of government assistance varies. There are some single mothers, and not just Black ones, who abuse the system and desire government assistance and nothing more for themselves or their children. However, there are others who use the government assistance temporarily to propel themselves and their children out of poverty.

According to Edin and Lein (1997), “most welfare recipients want to leave welfare for work. However, most also believe that unless they can lower the costs associated with work or increase their earning power through investments in further education, they will be unable to meet their expenses by working” (p. 254). Some women utilize the welfare program in hopes of finding a job and gaining the necessary tools to become better providers for their children, but sometimes this does not happen and the result is that these women are left to involuntarily portray the negative stereotype due to lack of economic security.

McLanahan and Booth (1989) argue that “economic insecurity is high in mother-only families because of the low earning capacity of single mothers, the lack of child support from nonresidential parents, and meager public benefits” (p. 562). McLanahan and Booth (1989) suggest that “single-parent homes often produce negative intergenerational consequences. Children in mother-only families are more likely to be poor and single parents, themselves, in adulthood than children who live with both parents” (p. 562).

### **Other Mothers**

In addition to welfare and familial support Black women also rely on the concept of other mothers when raising their children alone. Collins (1997) argues that the concept of other mothers is more prominent among Black women because of our heritage and sense of responsibility to one another’s children. “Black women’s feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their own extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable for the Black community’s children” (p.326).

According to Hogan, Hao, and Parish (1990) “ethnographic researchers and political activists alike have argued that the high rates of single parenthood among blacks are less problematic than among whites because intergenerational ties in black families are strong and because kin and friend networks are ready sources of social and economic support particularly for ethnic minorities” (p. 798). This is where Collins’ concept of other mothers comes into play. Motherhood is not only about the relationship between the mother and the child, but also about relationships between mothers. The concept of other mothers is one that shows the ways in which Black women support one another by offering support and advice on parenting, nutrition, and creating a stable home life for children.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist theory is a tool used by Black women to tell their own stories as opposed to having their stories told for them and to them by outsiders. Black feminist theory is especially important to this project because it has given participants an opportunity to dispute literature and show that there is always more than one side of a story. Black feminist theory exists to give Black women a space of their own to communicate about the issues that specifically affect them. history only recognizes White men, Black history only recognizes Black men, and feminism only focuses on liberating White women. This ostracizes the needs of Black women intellectually as well as socially (Hull, Scott, and Smith, 1982).

According to DuCille (2010) “black feminist theory gives Black women a voice that no other historical genre could give them” (p.32). Black Feminist Theory unapologetically makes Black men accountable for adhering to the same politics as the White men who once oppressed

the entire Black race, and it also holds White women accountable for their attempts to silence Black issues through traditional feminism. Black Feminist Theory is a safe space for Black women. It was created for Black women by Black women to tell stories about Black women. It is the genre that gives Black women an avenue to discuss the issues they live and experience every day without fear of judgment with others who can empathize with every word spoken.

According to Simien (2004) “black feminist consciousness arises from an understanding of intersecting patterns of discrimination.”(p.81) Simien argues that Black women do not have the luxury of separating the issues of race and gender because there is never a time when a Black woman is only Black or only woman. Simien’s argument contributes to the understanding of why Black feminist theory is as important as it is to Black women because it is the genre that does not require Black women to privilege specific parts of themselves while silencing others.

## **Chapter 3: Method**

### **Study Background**

Black Feminist Theory principles are at the heart of this study. I developed an appreciation for the purpose of Black feminist theory and I wanted to participate in privileging the voices of Black women. I was especially interested in privileging the voices of Black single mothers. My family tradition is Black single motherhood, and I have read things about Black single mothers that I never actually saw. For example, the idea that Black single mothers are typically bad mothers was never something that I witnessed. I always thought the single mothers in my family were great mothers especially since they were raising children by themselves. The older I got, the more often I saw and heard negative things about Black single mothers and my sensitivity to this peaked when I found out I was pregnant in August 2009.

During the Fall 2009 semester in graduate school I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my studies. I met a young professor one Monday afternoon in my COM 500 class who changed the way I viewed academic affairs instantly. At first glance, Dr. Robin Boylorn was a taboo treasure to me. She was obviously young, she was hip, and she was Black like me. I had never spoken to her, but I felt connected to her. She spoke of how she used narrative as a tool to communicate things Black women experience. I immediately thought this was an interesting way to record data and I reached out to Dr. Boylorn for help with starting a narrative project.

## **Two Babies and a Mule**

During the Spring semester of 2010 I took a class entitled Black Women's Stories, which was led by Dr. Boylorn. My final project was to interview a self-defined Black woman and turn the interview into a narrative. I chose to interview my best friend who was a Black single mother of two who was always overexerted and unappreciated. I felt that interviewing her would create appreciation from me to her and give her the opportunity to voice her experiences as a Black single mother. During the interviews with my best friend I was pregnant and had given birth to my son two months prior to the final interview. Once I turned the interviews into narratives, it was clear to me that I wanted to concentrate my graduate studies on Black single mother narratives. On Mother's Day 2010 my best friend gave me a book, *Black Pearls for Parents*. This book had 365 pages of affirmations and meditations which were to be read once daily to inspire extraordinary parenting for Blacks (Copage, 1995). This book, in combination with my Black Women's Stories project, helped me come up the idea for my thesis, *Of Mules and Pearls*.

## **Method**

The research methods used for this study are interactive interviews and autoethnography. I chose interactive interviews because they gave my participants the opportunity to be their own story tellers. The interviews were as much about me sharing my experience as it was about them sharing theirs. I chose to use interactive interviews as opposed to traditional interviews because interactive interviews present an opportunity for researchers and participants to connect through conversation. According to Wood (2000) traditional interviews are not as in depth as interactive

interviews and they are typically question-answer motivated as opposed to conversation motivated. Interactive interviews offered me and the participants the opportunity to connect based on shared experiences. Interactive interviews are “directed conversations,” meaning the exchanges between my participants and I were in formal yet focused (Wood, 2000).

The autoethnographic component of my study, where I include my experience as data, complimented the interactive interview approach. Ellis (1999) states that:

autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 673)

I used autoethnography to make me appear less like a researcher and more like a friend. I wanted to be seen as someone who could be trusted with my participants’ deepest feelings and private experiences because I was giving them the same thing. I shared my experiences with them so they would know that it was safe to share their experiences with me.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black single mothers reimagine their family dynamics?
2. How do Black single mothers define themselves?
3. What factors contribute to Black single mothers’ understanding of their experiences?

## **Design**

In an effort to have my research questions answered, I created a list of open ended interview questions for my participants to answer. I chose to ask open ended questions to encourage participants open up about the experiences they were comfortable sharing. The questions I asked (see Appendix) required more than a “yes” or “no” answer. The questions required them to think specifically about their questions and reflect over their lives to respond. While I was careful to not take over the conversations with my experiences, I did use pauses and transitions to share details and similarities between my experiences and theirs.

Given the limited free time of my participants, I designed the interviews so that they could be completed in one two hour sitting. This did not work for one of my participants and we completed her interview on two separate occasions. The total time for all participants’ interviews was approximately ten hours.

The selection of my participants was very important. Wood (2000) suggests that participants should be selected according to their knowledge of the subject matter and their ability to engage in directed conversation. I determined that the most qualified participants for this study would be Black women, between the ages of 21-60, who are currently or have previously raised children as single mothers.

In this study single mother refers to a woman who is unmarried and/or who does not live with the father of her children (or a partner). I also distinguish single mothers to refer to women whose children do not have consistent or ongoing relationships with their fathers. Prior to conducting interviews I had to gain approval from The University of Alabama’s Institutional

Review Board. Once I was approved I identified participants and began my interviews immediately.

## **Participants**

This study was inspired by a class project that required me to interview a Black woman about her life. I decided that in addition to my initial interviewee from that class project, I would solicit four additional participants to share their stories. However, the journey to collecting narratives was one of the most challenging aspects of this study. Unfortunately, due to a tornado in Alabama on April 27, 2011, two of the original participants were displaced and I was unable reach them to complete their interviews and narratives.

Losing two of my participants was discouraging. I knew that it would not be easy to solicit participation from women willing to share intimate stories with a stranger. However, because I wanted generalizable data I needed at least five participants. On May 31, 2011, I started a new job in Birmingham, Alabama. In July of 2011, I met a woman named Sam who worked with me. When I told her about my thesis study she agreed to participate and recommended another woman, which gave me the five interviews I needed.

Each participant was briefed on the purpose and origin of the study and asked to sign an informed consent form prior to participating in any interviews. The informed consent form outlined the background of the study and the expectations of participants. Since participants were asked to reflect over their lived experiences I wanted to make sure that they were in a comfortable environment. I allowed my participants to pick the location where their interview would be held.

I purchased five spiral notebooks that were all a different color and I used one notebook per participant to take notes about our interviews. I color coded the notebooks to keep each person's interview and narrative separate and to protect their identity. I assigned each participant a color and recorded the answers to the interview questions. I did not associate their names with their specific notebook to protect their privacy in the event that the contents of the notebook were lost. I did not use audio or video recording because I wanted the interviews to feel as conversational as possible and I believed that the handwritten notes would be sufficient for recording data. During interviews, I recorded each answer verbatim in preparation for transcriptions.

After meeting with each participant, I transcribed the interviews for two reasons. The direct transcriptions privileged my participants' voices and made it easier to turn the interviews into narratives. I chose to report my findings as narratives as opposed to a traditional "results" section as another way to privilege their voices and their experiences. The use of narrative in this study gives readers the opportunity to be present with these women as they discussed their personal lives. By telling their own stories they help to dispel negative stereotypes about Black single mothers with their lived experiences.

In the next chapter I offer five narrative experiences of being a Black single mother, and my own autoethnography. The narratives are spontaneously ordered and include a brief introduction of each participant, followed by their personal narrative, in their own words. My story, which concludes the narrative chapter, will offer personal background to my story and my own personal experience of single motherhood. The final chapter offers an analysis of each

narrative and an explanation of the themes that are used to redefine Black single motherhood.

The conclusion will summarize how this study contributes to literature about Black single motherhood, discuss shortcomings of this project, and offer suggestions for future studies on this topic.

## **Chapter 4: The Narratives**

Black women are often viewed as stoic and resilient beings. Oftentimes, the simplest things they do are amplified by their Blackness. One thing in particular that is usually amplified by Blackness is single motherhood. Many stories that I have read about Black single mothers give the impression that Black single mothers have no idea what it means to be “good mothers.”

Moynihan (1965) suggests that Black mothers are not good mothers because a good mother feels morally obligated to raise her children in a traditional family, but Black mothers are usually single. A good mother is usually financially secure, a good mother is docile, and always physically and emotionally available to her children. Black single mothers’ narratives are often told with major themes of lack and negativity that are usually perpetuated by someone other than Black women, such as (Moynihan, 1965). The average Black woman does not have an available platform where she can dispute negative depictions, thus she is silenced, until now. The subsequent pages contain five narratives about the lived experiences of Black single mothers in their own words. In addition to the narratives of these five women, I will also share my own experience as a single mother and how it connects with the others.

### **Equal Opportunity Employer**

Sam is a 36 year old single mother of four sons. Sam and I are co-workers. One day I noticed a picture on her desk of her and four young men who looked and dressed alike. I noticed that wanted there was a man missing from the “family picture” and became curious about her story. Sam seemed proud to entertain my nosiness and accepted my invitation to be interviewed. Sam was eager to set the record straight on negative ideologies that are commonly expressed in

reference to Black women and she did so unapologetically. She makes light of her journey through single motherhood with plenty of entertaining colloquialisms and she certainly provided me with a new understanding and new dimension of the term “single mother.”

Sam and I sat across from each other at her dining room table in her beautiful home in an a predominantly White subdivision. The walls were covered with pictures of her four sons and it was quiet in the three- level home, as the boys had not come home from school yet. “Alright, Baby Girl... Let’s get you in and out my business and get this over with,” she said to me with a smile. Her voice was strong and it told me that she was ready to tell me whatever I wanted to know. We both laughed. Sam started calling me “Baby Girl” sometime after I told her I was a 24 year old graduate student looking to interview Black single mothers for my thesis. She seemed so proud of me, and she didn’t even know me.

Sam’s eagerness to tell her story was coupled with her extremely demonstrative demeanor. I quickly noticed how she used her hands to express herself as if her words needed an Amen Corner. I also noticed how her confidence overflowed as she constantly ran her fingers through her short black and blonde haircut and began to tell me all about Sam, the equal opportunity employer. This is Sam’s experience:

*My name is Sam and I was chosen to do something extraordinary with my life. I am a Black single mother. I am honored that God thought highly enough of me to give me this huge responsibility. I am responsible for molding the lives of four young men and it has been an interesting ride thus far. Most of the time when I tell folks I have four children their initial response is “Damnnnnnnn!!!!” Then when I inform them that I do it all by myself, they repeat*

*“Damnnnnnnn!!!!” a little louder. I have an 18 year old son, an 11 year old son, and twin sons who are now eight old. My children each have different fathers except the twins of course. I know what you must me thinking: “Damnnnnnnn!!!!” Right? Well it’s not as big a deal as people try to make it. I like to think of myself as an equal opportunity employer, just cause one dude fuck up, I don’t have a problem hiring the next one.*

*My equality when it comes to men comes from a place of high expectations that I credit to being a daddy’s girl. I was daddy’s little girl. I could do no wrong in his eyes. I think this is why I have a hard time in relationships now. I got whatever I wanted from Daddy, so my expectations for any man that I have dealt with and those I will deal with is do what my daddy did. If I want something my man should provide it without question and if he can’t do it, I don’t need him. I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama with both parents in the house. I have one sister and two brothers and we all have the same mother and father. My parents were married after my older brother was born. They were married in 1967 up until my dad died in 2003. My dad was an excellent provider, my mom never really had to work because Daddy took care of everything.*

*My childhood was good and I had everything I wanted. In my teenaged years Daddy was on drugs, but my mom made sure we were oblivious to the bad things. Although Daddy had his flaws, as do most people, he was still the prototype of companion perfection. The older I get, the closer my mom and I grow in terms of our relationship. Now she and I laugh about the way I used to tell her that I would marry Daddy when I grew up. Back then I meant it literally but now I know that what I really meant is that any man checking for me better be a stand-up guy like my daddy. Period.*

*As you can probably tell from the fact that I am single, I had a few men in my life who obviously did not measure up. My first interaction with such a man was with my oldest son's father. He and I did not know each other very well, but that did not stop us from doing a little something that caused me to get pregnant my first year in college. I thought about aborting my first pregnancy, but son's father was so happy. I couldn't help but think that I did not know him, yet he wanted forever from me.*

*When I announced my pregnancy to my family, my aunt gave me an ultimatum to abort my baby or be ostracized. When I told my son's father that I was considering having an abortion, he was not supportive. As a matter of fact, he threw the abortion money at me and told me to stay away from him. When it came down to it, I did not have the heart to go through with the abortion and I used those 400 dollars to prepare for my baby's arrival. My son's father lived in Lower Alabama and had me bring the baby down for a visit when he was three months old.*

*Would you believe this fool had us travel all the way from Birmingham, Alabama and never told his family that he had a baby with me? We went down there for his grandmother's funeral, and I honestly believe he dropped that bomb on those people just as I walked in the door with my baby because there was an awkward silence coupled with bucked eyes. Back then, I didn't mind giving second chances, so I tried to work with him through that and I tried it for a year. It just didn't work and we had a bad break up and never thought about our relationship again and I have no regrets.*

*This relationship set the mold for the other men that would come into my life because my tolerance for bull shit was negative infinity, or so I thought. I met my second son's father many*

*years later, and he was a married man, so it should not surprise me or anyone else that I was a single mother at that time. A few years later I met my twins' father and we had babies and then we got married. That didn't work out too good either. I wasn't getting the things I needed from him. I was married to him, but he was not my father, as I told my mother many years prior I had to marry my father.*

*So here we are today, I have four children and none of their fathers are in the picture to assist me. My twins' father passed away in 2011 all of a sudden, and my other two sons' fathers... they may as well be dead. They never come around. I could paint the picture of inconvenience but who would care about all that. I am a single mother by choice. I pushed these men out of my life intentionally. My motto is "better they be away doing something instead being in my space doing nothing." I could have stayed in these situations but I was raised to accept nothing less than the best and that's what I do. Being a single mother all depends on what you are willing to tolerate, and in my experience, the lower your tolerance, the most likely you are to be a single mother.*

*One thing being a single mother shows me is that caution is a must. I cannot do whatever I want to do without considering the how it will affect my four children. I used to tell my "potential employees" that the main rule of dealing with me is: "Don't let the son catch your face at my place." This means a few things. It means that a dude can't spend the night with me, but most importantly, it means that my sons, neither of them, are to ever catch a man at my house. That is one thing in particular I have always vowed to protect them from.*

*Nobody had to teach me what my maternal duties are. I think I began having children at a time when I was still learning who I was and my children have grown and they have also been able to watch their momma grow. One thing that I have encountered as I have grown and learned is that people are so quick to judge me because I got these babies out of wedlock. I do not allow this to determine the kind of mother I will be... well you know what? Yes I do. I allow this to motivate me. One thing about me is that I will never tell you that I am perfect or holier than thou when I got "these babies out of wedlock." I know God is forgiving, but I don't play with him. He knows how He made me and that's alright with me just as it is alright with Him. I have learned that other folks have the problem, not me, and definitely not my children.*

*If you haven't figured it out, I embrace being a Black single mother. I see it as a badge of honor. I'm not a victim. I do a damn good job with it. I have heard all kinds of things that have sought to discourage me on my journey. The most entertaining of these is that a woman can't raise a man. I think I redefined that. My family dynamic is not stereotypical, we are not uneducated, and we are not on welfare. We do good for a black woman raising four boys. The only that I think my boys miss is the fact that their fathers are not in their lives. I wish it was different but if the fathers were not going to be consistent I'm glad they are not around. I am happy that I don't have those issues. Not a day goes by that I don't thank my father for the example he set. Daddy gave me the courage to say two important words: "You're Fired!"*

## **Brand New**

LaQuitha and I have been close friends since we rode Mrs. Duke's bus to Shades Valley High School together. She was three years older than me so we only had the privilege of being

classmates for her junior and senior year but we have been friends ever since then. LaQuitha is a new mother who recently became single. According to LaQuitha, motherhood has given her an incomparable sense of newness that she is not willing to compromise for anyone.

It had been at least a year since I had seen LaQuitha, prior to getting together with her to interview her for the study. We had several phone conversations and checked in with each other to share the best practices of motherhood, but we had not been in each other's presence. We both joked about it taking a college paper to bring us in each other's presence when we live in the same state. LaQuitha and I met at a local coffee shop so that she could tell me what being a single mother was like for her and just as I expected, she held nothing back.

I was a few minutes late to our interview due to traffic, so this gave me the opportunity to sneak up on LaQuitha. I walked in the coffee shop and saw the familiar face of my childhood friend. She had just left the beauty shop getting her first sew-in bobbed hairstyle and she was rocking it.

I could tell she still hadn't lost all of her baby weight. This was a relief for me because I had my baby nearly two years ago and I was still trying to convince myself, as well as well as others, that I was suffering from PPP (Post Pregnancy Phat). I walked up to her said, "Hey GUHHHHH!" She laughed louder than I remembered, stood up and hugged me. We both said, "Girl, you look good" to each other at the same time. It took us a minute to stop laughing and it took me even longer to see past the glow in my friends eyes. I watched her struggle with her confidence over the years and I was pleased to see that her struggle had come to an end. This is LaQuitha's experience:

*Honey, I'll tell you the truth, since I became a mother folks tell me I'm so brand new. You know what I say to them? "Why... Thank you!" I understand exactly what they mean. Before I had my daughter Schylar in February, I was a people pleaser but now I do things my way, unapologetically, at that. I never knew how important being a mom was until I had Schylar. Now that I'm a mother I cannot see myself being anything else. Growing up, I appreciated my mom, but the way I was raised led me to believe that my mom was dramatic and over protective. I did not understand my mother's behavior until I became a mother and now I feel that I may implement some of mothers same behaviors for raising Schylar and I want to protect her the best way I can. I wanted her to have a two parent household but that did not exactly happen.*

*From the start of my pregnancy I have to admit there was a huge red flag that said "Girl you may as well prepare to do this by yourself." When I first told my boyfriend, Jeff, that I was pregnant he said that he was glad about the baby but ambivalent about the timing. He eventually shook that ambivalence off but right before my first doctor's appointment he was back to telling me he did not think it was a good idea for me to have the baby.*

*Jeff's reaction told me that he possibly talked to someone who advised him that this was a mistake. I got brand new at that very moment and decided that I didn't give a hot sweaty damn what he was gon' do, I was going to have my baby with or without his support. I would be damned if I put a man before my baby and I mean that from the depths of my very soul. He and I went two weeks without speaking. He missed my first doctor's appointment and at this point I started preparing myself for single motherhood because I didn't think he would be there for me.*

*I have an extremely close relationship with my family and this was often an issue in my romantic relationship because my family was very unforgiving of any tumultuous activity that went on between Jeff and I. My family is so involved in my life, and Jeff went on and on about he didn't want our baby raised by my family because he felt that he would not be respected in the decision making process. His cowardice really motivated me to do it alone. I could not understand how he could allow what other people thought about him to dictate his position in our baby's life.*

*Not only was he flaking on me but things were taking an unexpected turn. I lost my job and the home I was creating for us and our baby. I was starting to think that everyone was right, that having a baby at this point was not what I was supposed to be doing. I was so stressed out. My mother talked about Jeff every chance she got. It was to the point that I would have to ask her to change the subject. Even when he came around, I was skeptical. He asked me to abort his own flesh and blood so I didn't believe he was sincere when he made attempts to be a part of the journey. I could not believe him. I felt as if I could not trust him. I did not want my baby to have any part of him, if I could help it, so I went against his wishes and I gave our daughter my last name.*

*Jeff was so displeased with my decision not to give the baby his last name that his presence in my life was uncertain. We would communicate sometimes and sometimes we wouldn't and all while this was going on, I thought "Girl you are heading down your momma's road." I came from a single parent household and I saw my mom as bitter. I never wanted to be like that. I know we don't always have to do the things our parents did, but I was becoming*

worried that this would be inevitable for me. Ironically, my mother was living proof that this did not have to be my destiny.

My mother and uncles were raised with both parents. My family has always been close and my maternal grandparents were at the center of our familial connection. I spent so many days of my life in their brick house in North Bessemer, Alabama getting cursed out by grandfather for misbehaving. My grandfather was King Shit when I was growing up and he was the heart of our family. My grandma wanted to be the only one to cook clean and cater to my grandfather. My uncles and I were so close in age that I viewed them as my brothers. Everything felt so perfect at my grandparents' house and this is where I spent most of my time.

My mom worked two jobs mostly so I never saw her except for at night. I grew up calling my mother by her first name and my grandmother was my "mama." I never had a father figure other than my granddad when it came to disciplining me. My mother was not always available to me because she was always working, and I sort of believe this is the reason she feels the need to be as overprotective as she is.

I always found myself saying that I did not want to be like my mother when it came to her style of parenting. Growing up it was all about family and nothing else. My mother always expected every aspect of my life to be shared with my family. She took my life outside of family away from me with familial obligations. I always said that I would never want to do that to my daughter.

I often felt trapped because my family was so close and even in my close family I often felt as if I fell through the cracks somehow. I was not able to experience anything on my own.

*Even at 27 I still feel that I have not been able to be away from my family nor have I been given an opportunity to miss them. My point here is that, even with what seemed to be the most perfect and supportive family dynamic, my mom still wound up raising my sister, my brother, and me by herself even though she came from a family of two.*

*I paid close attention to the way my momma did things. I learned from her that being a single mother means you have to be a woman who takes on many roles. This was most important to me when I became a mother because I had to be the mother, father, sister, and friend. I saw my mom taking on all these roles while still attempting to live a life for herself and now this what I have to do.*

*I really never thought about it until I juggled work school and parenting while seeing the struggles of other Black single mothers. I never understood how all those roles can monopolize your time. I realized that it makes you have a thick skin. I never wanted this. I didn't want to be the stereotype. I never wanted to be the bitter negative gold digger like we are depicted as on television and movies. Now that I am a single mother I don't view it as negative, I view it as being a great mother and putting her first. All the other shit can be placed on the back burner.*

*I remember when I used to go out every weekend but being a parent changes things, especially when you are a parent who is a single mother. I never want my child to be confused about who I am or what my role is in her life so I make sure that I am the one who is raising her and influencing her. The simplest things before were getting up and going to work are now magnified by the fact that I do this alone. It is an adjustment to make sure that Schylar has what she needs as well as me.*

*I prepared myself to be a single mother because I didn't want any man in my life distracting me, but to be honest it has its days were you wish you had someone to depend on. On the other hand, I am never reminded of being a single mother until I have to drop her off with my grandmother or until my mom mentions child support. I would prefer not to have the headache of court dates, but financially I can't do it by myself, but if I have to that's fine with me. Things that used to hurt my feelings don't even bruise 'em no more.*

*I'm so brand new because I have someone depending on me who needs me to be strong. In the name of motherhood there is a lot of shit I am not putting up with. I'm responsible for someone else so petty things don't affect me. I have learned how to say no and how to be selfish and take better care of myself and my daughter. She gave me a swag and I'll be damned if I'm giving it back.*

### **God's Gift Multiplied By Six**

Natasha is a 40 year old single mother of 6. She was recommended by another participant. Upon meeting Natasha, I was intrigued by her presence. Her smile said more to me than her words. Her smile told me that she was in love and I could not wait to talk to her about it. She tightened up the bandana she wore around her head full of natural hair. I could not escape the love that surrounded Natasha as we sat on the couch in her living room and she watched her children eat and talk to each other. This is Tasha's experience in her own words:

*More than 20 years ago I lived a selfish and reckless life. I was known around my way as the ultimate shit starter. I was always ready to fight. I was never a clubber or partier but I loved to be mean to whoever gave me a problem. I had a huge chip on my shoulder during my*

*young adult years and miraculously it fell off in 1996 when I became a mother for the first time. I did not want to continue living my life as reckless as I had been living it; I wanted my baby to be proud of me. The way I was sure to create a sense of pride in my son's family life was by giving him a good start like my parents did.*

*I was raised in Los Angeles with both of my parents initially. My mom lived by the Bible and my father was very different. He smoked weed and did those types of things. He was really cool to me. My mom's attitude was that "do as I say and don't ask why" type of thing and it made it hard for us to connect for where I was in my life. I was intrigued by my father. My dad wanted sons so I tried to be that for him. I was my dad's homeboy, even after he and my mom split, I still had this amazing connection with him. This is the same kind of connection I wanted for my son and his father.*

*The first two years of my marriage seemed to provide that type of fairytale connection I wanted for my son and my husband. Things were going so well I ended up having another son during the first two years. Eventually my fairytale came to an end and I ended up raising my boys alone. At this point, I realized that you could be married and still be a single parent because I saw myself in a marriage but I was solely responsible for our children. Being a single mother is about caring for your children by yourself. My responsibilities to my children always required me to make sure they are fed, clothed, and emotionally gratified at any cost.*

*Not only is my children's emotional gratification important to me, but my own emotional gratification means a lot because it is the root to my family's security. This was never clearer to me than around the time my sons' father and I split up. I was able to move forward and meet*

*another man with whom I conceived a daughter. My efforts to stay in that relationship were unsuccessful as well and before I knew it I was I single mother of three children hoping that God's plan for us was much better than my understanding of the way things were.*

*While I was working on understanding God's plan two years later, I was pregnant with another daughter. Just as with my other relationships it did not work out the way I imagined. I ended up being a single mother of four children constantly depending on the Heavenly Father to open my eyes and open doors so that my children would lack nothing. Looking back, it makes me angry to think that I did not create my children by myself, but I do all the work by myself. I get child support for my children, but that means nothing compared to relationship I want them to have with their fathers.*

*In all honesty, I am not happy being a single mother, but God believed in me enough to give me this responsibility over my four children. God believed in me so much that He blessed me with two more children in 2006 when my sister passed away. It isn't easy, but it is my responsibility and moral obligation to mother all six of my children to my fullest capacity. When my sister left us, I realized that being a mother goes beyond the children that grow inside your womb, but it also extends to unspoken responsibility for others.*

*Although this did not come full circle for me until my sister passed, it was briefly introduced to me earlier in life before I even became a mother. One thing I have always wanted to do with my life is being a mother. When I was 16, I had the strongest desire for being a mother and I had no idea where it came from. God knew better for me at 16 and did not allow me to be a mother at that time, but the desire was enough for me. I wanted someone to love me*

*unconditionally, and aside from God, I knew that a baby was the only person who would be able to give me the love I was in need of.*

*I felt this loving connection for my children before they even arrived, but now that they are here the most important thing in my life is protecting them. I feel like my children don't have as many advantages as kids with two parent households, which means I have to work twice as hard just so my children have a fighting chance. I find it troubling that I struggle with having enough time to invest in each child the way I would like to. At these times I can definitely feel the aftermath of being a single parent because I often feel as if I leave a lot of stuff undone.*

*Now that I am experiencing single motherhood for myself, I can empathize with some of the things my mother experienced after she and my dad divorced. My mother always had to work. She was never able to attend field trips or anything like that. Some people would view this as a negative circumstance, but I know better. My mom did the best she could and sometimes it meant that she could not be with me all the time because it was more important to her to make sure that I never lacked food or shelter.*

*My mother taught me what being a Black woman is about. She taught me that it means a lot of sacrifice and hardship because we have multiple things working against us being born black and woman. By the same token it means that I have a spirit of independence, strength and pride. One thing I learned from watching my mom and I see it exhibited through me, is that failure is not an option for black women because we have to be super woman.*

*For me personally, being super woman is the only way to raise six children by myself. I have to be honest, I feel like my children don't have as many advantages as kids with two parent*

*households, but I also know that God is able to give them whatever I can't give them. I know that my children are God's gift to me. I have to be super strong for them because one thing I never wanted for them was to worry about grown people problems. I see kids who look stressed out trying to take on more than what they should.*

*I don't want my kids to ever concern themselves with the things that worry me. I love them. I try to protect them. I always want them to know that they are important so I always seek their opinions about things big and small. My kids are why I live. Although many people may not view our life as a single parent household as "the norm", I don't feel sorry for myself nor my children. I just find peace in the fact that I have been blessed with God's gift multiplied by six.*

### **Claire Huxtable**

Chantella and I have been friends since we were high school freshmen. We first met when I exhibited some stereotypical Black girl behavior. She caught me rolling my neck and having a hostile verbal exchange with a white boy who made some inappropriate comments about my deceased mother. She watched me from afar and laughed. I loved her from that moment because she didn't make me feel like I was crazy for being "the angry Black girl." When we got older she did hold me accountable for my actions and made me promise that I would control my emotions in the face of opposition. She promised me the same thing, and her promise was never more tested than when she became a mother in 2006.

Chantella and I share the most beautiful sisterhood that I could have ever hoped for in life. When it was time to do her interview she was eager to participate, not because she wanted her story to be heard, but because she wanted to have a footprint in my journey to completing my

Master's degree. I took a trip to Helicon, Alabama, where she just moved to in August of 2011. Helicon is a rural town near Huntsville, Alabama where Chantella lives with her grandmother and two daughters.

When I arrived at her grandmother's home Chantella and her 3 year old daughter were in Grandma's garden picking string beans for dinner. I watched as mother and daughter wearing sun hats and smiles while pick beans. Chantella wore a long orange sundress to match her hat and she was happy to see me. We sat on the porch and drank fresh squeezed lemonade that and began to talk about her experience as a Black woman who is a single mother. This is Chantella's experience:

*My journey to motherhood does not begin with the day that I became a mother but when I realized I was a woman. I'm 24 years old now, but I had my first baby when I was 18. I was still living a child's life myself. I had no responsibilities, but the moment I realized that was about to change, I made a decision to shift my thinking from selfish to responsible. This change was a slow process. I was a college student doing what freshmen college students do and all of a sudden I had 40 weeks to learn the meaning of womanhood.*

*I made a bad decision and entertained a dude, B.J., who I wasn't into for real. I wound up getting pregnant by him and so my journey began. I still remember it like it was yesterday. I found out I was pregnant the beginning of the second semester of my sophomore year and I secluded myself from everyone. I was inspired by Afeni Shakur's book, Evolution of a Revolutionary. She was in jail while pregnant with Tupac and I was inspired by that, thinking if she can do it, I can do it.*

*I must admit... abortion ran across my mind for a split moment. I think whenever you're young, unmarried and newly pregnant: abortion runs through your mind, but in my case, that's all it did. It didn't quite make its mark. I knew people who went and got abortions without thinking of the consequences and it was detrimental to their psyche. I spent a lot of time to myself and with myself. I didn't know what to do. I would sit in quiet and think about all my options. One day I got up and said "Queen you can't continue to sit in here like this." So I got up, left my dorm and set out to find B.J. and I finally told him that I was pregnant.*

*I don't know which was colder, the February wind, or his response. He looked me square in the face and said: "What the fuck I'm posed to do wit some more kids?" And I'm like: What the fuck? Some MORE kids? So at this point I'm definitely trippin' cause this type of shit don't happen to me. When I first meet a dude I grill em... You know... how many kids you got? How many baby mommas do you got? When was the last time you got tested? Are you straight or are you just pretending? All that kind of stuff, and he never told me he had any children. UNTIL NOW. So what was I to do? How was I to feel? What was I to say? Absolutely nothing... the only thought that ran through my mind was whooping his ass. Yeah that's right. I tried to kill that fool, and it wasn't because he hurt my feelings directly. It was the shit he did indirectly. He told me he ain't have no kids. I'm sure he didn't tell me because I don't mess with nobody without grillin em and "DO YOU GOT SOME KIDS!?" is the first question on my list. It was the lie that earned him the ass whooping. Because while he was lying, I was thinking, and when the truth came out I was STILL thinking. "Like... so you ain't gon claim your kids?"*

*After collecting my thoughts and returning back to Queen mode from Savage mode, I realized that I would be going through what I am going through right now. I knew that I would be raising my baby alone. I realized my responsibility. I realized the power of what I was about to go through. Every other woman I knew was doing it by their self so it wasn't nothing that I felt like I couldn't do. I come from a long line of out of wedlock children. I'm one, my momma was one, my grandmamma was one, and now I was about to add another one.*

*Time moved forward and I got myself together, or so I thought. I moved to Huntsville and started working at a call center and met a guy, James. I am usually not attracted to light skinned men but he caught my mind and my eye with the way he carried himself. I was celibate at the time he and I started kicking it, but celibacy took a backseat to the attraction I developed for him. The next thing I knew I was pregnant and on the phone listening to him cry and apologize for ruining my life. That's really not the response I was hoping for but it made me confident that I would be raising my new baby alone as well. I did not know what to do with two babies, but I did know that I had a few things to learn about myself, not only as a mother but as a Black woman as well.*

*Being a Black woman is an ever changing wisdom to me. It means something special today and it will mean something different tomorrow. It stays the same but the daily experience is different. I had to master this before I could attain what being a productive contributor to motherhood really meant. We are all trying to reach that "Claire Huxtable" status of it all. I know we are all trying to master being a profound woman and mother in the same body. We all know Claire Huxtable is not a real woman but she is arguably the epitome of what a good Black*

*woman and mother should be. I know that Claire Huxtable took her responsibilities as a mother seriously and I know I do as well.*

*As a mother I know I am the vessel and nurturer of the future. Since I am raising daughters I know that I am their first example of womanhood, sisterhood, and black woman up close and personal. Their perception of black womanhood is based on how I move because I am their mother. If I had sons it would be the same but in a different capacity. I would be the example of what he should hope for in a woman. However, since I have not been blessed with sons and I am the mother of two daughters, I have to be extremely careful of the things I implant in my daughters' psyches so that I don't tarnish their future experience of womanhood before it begins.*

*This is extremely important when it comes to words and terminology. When you put Black and single mother in the same sentence, you might as well say I'm oppressed and depressed. That term is filled with jeopardies. This is the reason I am considerably selective with labels and things of that nature. Take the term single mother for example this term is implanted in us because of the nature of life. It's not always a bad thing and it certainly isn't a new thing.*

*Single mothers have been around for ages often times because of the gender roles between men and women. Men have left their women lonely for many reasons. Men have been prisoners of war or sometimes their own pathologies kick in and they may jump ship. This is nothing new. The times we live in and the media dominated society tend to make us view the*

*things we go through out of content, and if there is one thing I have learned, it is that all things must be explored within their proper content.*

*Single motherhood is an illusion. I'm not single mother. I am a mother who is single. I have never been an island through my journey. There is always someone there to support and encourage me. My family, friends, friends who become family, all support me because it takes a village to raise children. I may be the only biological parent my daughters have but I am not raising them by myself.*

*Single motherhood, for me, is a symptom of things greater and I'm saying this because I have been willing to explore my situation and get to the root of the pathology that led me to this place that includes my daughters and me without their fathers. Many single mothers, with whom I have been acquainted, don't examine themselves or their situation whole heartedly so they view it as oppression but I tell them that their perception is everything. I don't view my motherhood or the singleness of it as constraining. I know that it is not ideal but every day it brings forth a new lesson and I'm alright with that.*

*The lessons in life make it worth living. Going back to my girl Claire Huxtable, she and Cliff taught their children lessons on every episode of *The Cosby Show* that I have seen, but their kids never got it right the first time. As parents we have to face the fact that our children may turn out different from what we implant in them, and that's not entirely bad. This is something that my parents and I have struggled with for most of my life because many of my choices do not line up with my family's dynamics.*

*I was raised in a two parent household by people who were doing the best they could with what they had and with the things they were going through. I could spend time telling you what was wrong but why? That's not important. I do a lot of reading and I only invest my time in reading that will help me be better and to show me what is important. Most of the things I read are about family dynamics because I am working to raise my girls in a family dynamic that most folks think is abnormal. Many books I read try to correlate our decisions with our parents' decisions. My observations outside of scholarly research show otherwise. Our own actions and wills kick in. Our emotions kick in. I didn't come from a single parent household, but that is the family dynamic that I can offer my daughters right now.*

*I'm not oppressed or depressed about my current family dynamics. I don't beat single mother drums or oppression percussion because that's not how I view my situation. This entire society is opposed to my nature so being a mother who is single is easy. Being a woman in a male dominated society ain't hot nor is being Black in a White world the hottest trend. Since I have seemed to handle both of these with so much grace, I can definitely tell you that being a mother is the easy part of my day.*

*Black women as a collective don't need other folks telling us where we go wrong, nor do we need to buy into what we should be or could be if we did what other folks do. As a Black woman I was often taught that Jesus was the answer to all my problems, but being a mother created a mental independence in me that disagrees with Jesus' ability to help me understand my family dynamics as a woman raising my daughters alone.*

*I don't look to "religion" but I do consult my spirituality when it comes to my children. I have learned that religion becomes a convenience and a crutch that often drives Black women away from their men. The answers to our questions can only come from looking within the self. Jesus don't provide for me without me showing him some effort from myself.*

*A lot of the things that Black women feel are problems are only shit that is implanted in us to make shit convenient. For example, single motherhood is a "problem" and running to church to redeem single mother hood is the convenience we need to believe it will get better. This has proven to be counterproductive for me, so my love for reading other things has taught me far more than the church can teach me.*

*The church teaches us that God is merciful and that it is our responsibility to make the best of bad situations. In my opinion, this is unhealthy thinking because it leads us to believe that only certain types of mothers should be honored. We are not taught to honor motherhood. We don't see motherhood being praised.*

*Most women view getting pregnant before you're ready as an opportunity to make the best out of a bad situation. As a collective we do not understand motherhood. We can't have discussions about motherhood without understanding womanhood. Before you can be anything you have to have the knowledge and workings of it. Motherhood is the most important thing to me and I believe that a lack of honor for motherhood creates a false divorce for the woman as mother. The only problem with this is that motherhood cannot be separated from womanhood. When the woman is hurt so is the mother, and it took me understanding all these things before I could reconcile my emotions with my reality of being a single mother.*

*In retrospect, there were so many indications that I would be raising my children alone. It takes a great level of personal accountability to admit this. My emotional state and my perception got me here. Not honoring the proverbial voice in my heart got me here. Looking back I am not surprised that I am raising them alone, I can try to blame my daughters' fathers for their absences but I would rather not. I would rather take responsibility for my contributions to our family dynamics because trying to be responsible for my actions as well as the actions of others is the reason we as Black women are overexerted in the first place.*

*A day will come when my girls have questions about their fathers and because I am not emotionally shattered or scattered I will be able to explain things to them in a productive way and tell them they have a choice to be victimized or a choice to make better decisions and not perpetuate a cycle. I made the choice today for my daughters who are now five and three years of age to make sure the genesis of their womanhood is filled with clarity and acceptance starting with me. I want to be clear about something when it comes to their fathers.*

*I don't walk around with guilt or the victim venom because they decided that their pathologies were more important than the innocent lives they created. I don't think I need to be praised for raising my children by myself, but for me to be able to be triumphant within myself, and be the best fruit on our family tree, some understanding had to take place. I can honestly say that I'm satisfied with my level of understanding with my role as a Black woman who is a single mother and for me, that's the first step to getting the Claire Huxtable of it all.*

## **Gramma's Pearls**

My final participant was my grandmother, Debra, who I affectionately refer to as Gramma. I have had the hardest time in life trying to make sense of Gramma's way of thinking. I did not know what to expect from this interview, but Gramma did not hesitate to participate and that was all I really needed from her. Gramma and I conducted this interview in her bedroom.

I sat on her bed with my legs crossed and she was lying down in her favorite royal purple caftan. Her deep brown skin was vibrant as it usually is when she gets her salt colored hair shaved down and she looked at me over her glasses like only she could do and said, "Alright now, Jakki, I have things to do today so let's get to it." I laughed at her like I always do when she tries to sass me and I said, "Gramma, please, you on MY time." We both laughed as I opened my notebook to a fresh sheet of paper to learn some pearls of wisdom from Gramma. This is Gramma's experience:

*At 60 years old I have been some places and seen some things that have ushered in God's wisdom in my life. I wear God's wisdom daily as if it were a string of pearls. The beginning of my learning life began when I was a young girl living in a tiny three bedroom house with my parents, my two brothers, and four sisters in Pipe Shop in Bessemer, Alabama.*

*I was the youngest out of everyone so not only was I raised by my parents but I was also raised by my older siblings, specifically my oldest sister. My parents were very strict, but I believe my parents loved me the best way they knew how to according to what they had been taught. I was cared for. There were some things I did not understand, but as I grew older I understood and was able to reconcile my misunderstanding and confusions. My parents taught*

*me many things deliberately and other things I learned just from being a nosey little girl.*

*Although my parents were married my mother was responsible for nurturing us. One thing I learned from watching my mother is that I never wanted children. I watched her day in and day out devote all her time to raising us and I often wondered how she could possibly fit time in for herself.*

*I wanted to be as far away from my mother's life in Pipe Shop as I possibly could be. I wanted to go places and see things, and I certainly knew there was more to life than hanging out in Pipe Shop every day. When I was a teenager I moved to Los Angeles to live with my older sister. I had an extremely social life and could not imagine slowing down for anything or anyone. I viewed motherhood as something that would tie me down and prevent me from living the life I wanted to live. Of course I changed my tune when I became a mother.*

*I can't give you any dates or times because this was so long ago in my life and I am so far removed from it, but I remember that I was married young and my feelings about motherhood began to change. I don't really remember when I was married, but I do know that my marriage lasted for thirteen years and four children before we divorced. I never expected to be a mother, let alone a single mother. That's what happened though. I had to quickly produce some kind of womanly wisdom.*

*I first had to accept the responsibility that God blessed me with when he gave me my two daughters and two sons. I learned that being a mother is an honor that is bestowed upon women by God, who in His infinite wisdom chose me to bring forth life from Him and to trust me with the responsibility of caring and providing for His gifts. Being a mother is the highest*

*responsibility in the earth. I feel this in my heart for all mothers, but for single mothers the responsibility is twice as high because it requires you to fill a number of roles, and that's not so easy if you're doing all this while being Black.*

*Single mothers are responsible for caring for children without the benefit of the physical, financial, and emotional assistance of someone else. In our society and culture this would mean a woman who is raising her children without assistance from their biological father. This is what became of me. I quickly noticed that nothing stayed the same. This required me to consistently prioritize my life and various situations as they would arise.*

*One thing that kept me grounded during the beginning of my journey as Black single mother was learning that my perception determined the outcome of every challenge that I faced. I often recall how I felt as a young single mother, I didn't want babies because I didn't want my life as I knew it to change. Now I can credit that to my perception. My children did not stop me from living life, I just had to live it a different way.*

*As with anything in life, the view you have of yourself determines the view you will have with the challenges and changes that affect your living. Certainly, there are some things that you may not be able to do according to the ages of your children, but that don't last forever. Single motherhood is an adjustment. It is something you must accept and come to terms with and do the best you can while going through the process. While trying to come to terms with my journey, I held on to God and his Word and as a result I try to filter the things I do through what is written in the scriptures.*

*The scriptures are my pearls of wisdom when it comes to parenting. The scriptures validate my desire for my children to have a better life than I had. For my two daughters I never wanted them to be single mothers nor did I ever want my sons to be irresponsible and cause a woman to be a single mother. Single motherhood has the power to be a generational curse if there isn't something done to teach women how to make wiser choices and family role models don't change. If the heads of families do not take a more active role in the lives of the sons and daughters we will continue to see women raising children involuntarily by themselves. Don't get me wrong, I don't believe this is a failsafe plan because people still do what they want to do, but an effort needs to be made.*

*Raising four children by myself in South Central Los Angeles was no easy task, but I did the best I could do for my babies by myself. The thing about single motherhood is that it heightens your maternal instincts and it rearranges your perception of things as well as people. Being a single mother causes me to be able to see other people for who they are and understand the why of the things they do. It causes me to be compassionate and accepting toward other people and that helped me to change my perception of the way other people treated me.*

*I remember praying to God for the strength to be the best mother I could be and his words to me were so loud and clear: "Accept your situation, understand and forgive yourself. Do not place your expectations in people. If people are going to help you they will do it. Your circumstance does not define who you are. Learn how to live with delayed gratification, your soul will thank you later for it. Do the best you can with what you have and always be honest in dealing with others when something comes up and you can't keep your word. Do not blame your*

*children for the situation; they are innocent in all of this. If a man can't love your children, he can't love you. Keep everything in the right perspective. Do not live your life as if you are needy, even if you feel that you are. Live above your present circumstance. You overcome in your mind, and I am always a prayer away."*

## **BBBB**

The stories of my participants compelled me to reflect on my own life and find out what my experiences say about me. During interviews with my participants I was always able to find some common ground with them to share what I experienced while listening to their reflections. Their reflections shaped the way I viewed my own reflections and here is my experience.

I am known to many as Jai Ross, but my momma named me Jacqueline DeShawn Ross on October 3, 1987 in a hospital somewhere in Los Angeles, California. I was born to a teenaged mother and an absent father. My mother was with me for three short years, and was murdered outside our apartment in Inglewood, California. I remember waking up that morning knowing that it would be the perfect day. I remember walking out of my room and finding my mother in her house clothes sitting in the door way of our kitchen patio polishing her toe nails. "Hey, Boo," she said to me when she saw me. "Good morning Mommy," I responded.

Something in her eyes told me that today would be a day that I would never forget. Mommy got me dressed and we hung out all day with her Puerto Rican boyfriend, Michael. I had a beloved Black Cabbage Patch doll named Mark and he came with me wherever I went. Mommy, Michael, Mark, and I went to Chuck E. Cheese that day and I remember having so much fun. It was dark when we got home and Mommy and Michael were having a normal

conversation. All of a sudden Michael leaned in to Mommy's lap and jokingly said, "I ate too much pizza, I have to throw up." As he leaned into her lap I remember Mommy laughing and saying "You better not throw up on me." No sooner had she uttered those words, a car pulled up beside us and opened fire. No one was hit but Mommy. I can still hear her gasping for air. I felt the blood all over Mark's face and Mommy was fighting to stay with me.

Mommy's fight did not last long and she died at the hospital that night. I was left with Gramma, who was stoic at that moment, my grandfather, who was belligerent and overcome with grief, and my aunt and two uncles, who were inconsolable. Gramma and I had several court dates before I was officially under her care and I adjusted pretty well. I remember walking up to strangers and telling them, "I know where my mommy is," when they would ask me where, I would simply point to the sky.

Gramma no longer wanted to live in Los Angeles by the time I was 6. We moved to Bessemer, Alabama. I learned a lot about being Black when we moved to the South. In LA I went to school with all types of people, but moving to the South, everyone was either Black or White, with the occasional Latino here and there.

The White girls at my school made it clear to me that my unprocessed hair and Cali girl accent was not welcome in my first grade class. I was often teased for having "nappy hair" and for my lack of Southern drawl. This is where my disconnection with my gender developed because the White girls I came up with were so mean.

Growing up in California blinded me to racial injustice so I credited their antagonistic behavior to the fact that they were Southern girls who were White. I identified myself as a Black

person who happened to be a woman. For me, being Black was the best thing God ever did for me. The disconnection between my race and gender continued throughout my teenaged years and through my early twenties. I must admit that initially I had no idea what it meant to be a Black woman. I was so in love with the fact that I was a Black person that my gender always took a backseat to my race.

It wasn't until I became pregnant in 2009 that I realized the gift of womanhood that I had been blessed with. This realization came to me in an "a-ha moment" that I affectionately named the four B's of my womanhood. In this moment I realized that I was Born female, Black, Broke, and 'Bout to be somebody's momma. This taught me that there was more to life than just being Black. The four B's taught me that I have other factors in my being that have the potential to oppress me and these factors need love and attention as well, especially if I would be responsible for another life when I became a mother.

I was cautioned by many people in family to forget about graduate school and find a "good enough job" with my degree. This was not acceptable for me. I was unacceptable for me without a baby, and damn sure was unacceptable for me now that I was 'bout to be somebody's momma. I never understood why people treat children like pause buttons in life that cause us to postpone life. I did not view pregnancy or motherhood as a pause button. I viewed it as a propeller. I used my pregnancy as an excuse to be overly ambitious because a "good enough job" was not good enough for me or my baby.

I went to school and work with a belly and I did not mention "my condition" to folks unless they mentioned it to me. It's funny now, but I would walk around like nobody noticed my

belly, and when I was asked I would say, “Oh yeah, I’m pregnant,” and I would keep it moving. I did not want to be questioned about why I went to graduate school knowing I would be having a baby soon, and I definitely did not want to be viewed as feeble because I was pregnant. Even though many of my family found my decision to go to graduate school repulsive and selfish, Freddie supported me every step of the way.

Freddie came with me to all my doctor’s appointments and I still remember my appointment for the month of October. This was the day we found out that we were having a son. Freddie was so happy just like he was when I told him I was pregnant. I was happy too, but good ol’ ambivalence reared its ugly head again. I remember feeling a sense of worry. I could not escape thoughts of being left to raise my baby alone, and I especially did not want to raise a Black boy without a father. Freddie was a good man in my eyes, even after three years, but the cynic in me said “They all start out as good men, until something extraordinary happens.”

I felt that we were tested when I went into labor three weeks earlier than anticipated. I remember sitting in the hospital room alone waiting for the nurses to come check on me. Freddie left to get our cell phone chargers. The nurses left. The doctor was gone, and I was all alone. I began to cry, weep, and grieve because it was quiet. The silence was the loudest noise I had ever heard in my life. It was haunting. I could hear the silence tell me that I was all alone and Freddie was never coming back. I was on a head trip and I knew he was coming. He had to be coming back.

Freddie came back a few hours later and stayed with me through the entire process. Kody arrived at 12:21 am on February 28, 2012. I was so afraid at this point because it was

becoming clear to me that I was responsible for someone else's life. I did not want to ruin his life and I questioned my ability to raise him the right way. I felt so ill prepared, but I did not have the luxury of time to get myself ready the way I wanted to be ready but I began to appreciate Freddie's present even more.

Things were easy in the hospital, but going home that next week was scary. I was still waiting for Freddie to leave me hanging, but he never did. Everything was perfect. I had my son, and my man by my side at all times. I stayed home from school and work for about three weeks and I felt like the worst mother in the world when I left Kody to go back. Freddie's job understood that he needed to be home with Kody and me, but I could not miss too much school or too much work without it impacting me negatively. The first day back to work was difficult. Freddie dropped me off because the doctor ordered me to stop driving for eight weeks after delivery. I sat in the backseat with Kody as he slept. I kissed him on the cheek more times than I could count and I cried because I felt so horrible about leaving him.

Freddie was supportive of my return to work and school. I never once got up in the middle of the night when our new baby woke up because he always wanted me to be well rested. He always told me to make sure that my school work was done and he would tend to Kody to minimize my stress.

I was so thankful for Freddie, but I soon grew envious of his ability to connect with Kody without the stress and worry of other things. Freddie's job gave him paid paternity leave for three months and I could tell that he was Kody's favorite person. I hated this so much because I am Kody's mother and that fondness should have been mine, not Freddie's. I used to cry

because I felt like Kody didn't know who I was because I spent my days at work and my afternoons at school trying to put myself in a position to be a better mother. The irony of it is that being away from him while I was bettering myself made me feel like a bad mother.

Although I was glad Freddie didn't leave me hanging when it came to Kody, I still developed resentment toward him because I felt that he was a better parent than me. The older Kody got, the more Freddie and I began to bicker. We had moments that we just could not get along. We both had enough respect for Kody to attempt to keep our arguments away from him, but we still would hurt each other with our words.

One particular day I had enough of the arguing and we split up. My worst fears came true. I was a single mother and I did not have the heart to tell anyone, especially Gramma because I wanted so badly to break the cycle of single motherhood that she always warned me against. During this time my family assumed that Freddie was always working since they never saw us together and I let them think whatever they wanted to think if he kept them out of my business. The reality was that Freddie moved out and Kody and I spent time being each other's everything because essentially, all we had was each other.

I had to prove to Kody, Freddie, and to myself that I *was* a good mother. Of course I would have rather had the happy ending and raise Kody with his daddy, but that was impossible because I refused to spend my days feeling inferior to a man about how to raise our baby. I was not going to keep bickering about what color the sky was. I was done. I was a single mother and I all right with that. It was hard as hell though. I wore a few imaginary hats. Momma, student,

employee and all these hats required all 100 % of my being. I felt overexerted most of the time, but I kept pushing because I wanted everybody to know that I could handle my business.

I went from never having to wake up in the middle of the night to waking up every three to four hours to either change Kody or make sure he was fed. In addition to this, I had to wake up two hours earlier than I did when Freddie was home because I had to make sure Kody and I were fed, cleaned, and clothed. I also had to make sure that we were out of the house in enough time for me to take him to Chantella's house, which was about twenty-five minutes from my house headed in the opposite direction of my job. Although Freddie's absence changed everything for Kody and me, it definitely gave us the opportunity to bond. The time we had to bond was necessary for me to be fulfilled as a mother.

While my motherly instincts were being fulfilled, Freddie's fatherly bond with Kody was suffering because he was not with Kody all day every day the way he was in the beginning. Freddie has always been extremely fond of Kody so nothing would stop him from coming to see Kody. Freddie would even call him every day, even though Kody could not talk. I think that was his way of trying to stay in my thoughts, but for a while I was not having it. During my journey as a single mother, my skin thickened and I was no longer in a position to tolerate chaos. I was living for something greater than myself and I was not losing focus for anyone, not even Freddie.

I loved Freddie, but at that point, love was not enough. I didn't feel like he respected me and I wanted respect more than I wanted him to love me. The break-up did not last very long, but it gave me my personal experience with single motherhood. I will never say that it was easy,

but it was not necessarily hard either it was only an adjustment as is everything else in life. Time passed and Freddie asked me if he and I could talk. I said yes and met him at the Iguana Grill.

Freddie was dressed in a pair of khakis and a navy blue cardigan with a white polo shirt underneath. I wore a pink halter sundress that said “This lady is happy.” Kody was with Chantella during this time. So it was just Freddie and me. He looked into my eyes and said, “I know we weren’t getting along and I take full responsibility for our demise. I know you are moving forward, but I don’t want you to do it without me. Can I please come home to you and Kody? I want to work on us. I don’t know what will happen, but we owe it to each other and to Kody to try and have a family. I’m willing to work if you are. Please?”

During the time we were apart, I did a lot of thinking and I also knew that I had options, but my only reservation was Freddie. We wanted some of the same things out of life and the main thing was a functional family unit for our son. We both agreed that this could be accomplished whether or not we were together, but we both wanted to raise our son together. We both wanted to imprint Kody with our individual wisdoms and I had grown to accept the family dynamics we created, even though marriage was not included.

Freddie took a step to change our family dynamics on January 24, 2012, I was in the midst of working on my thesis and Freddie asked me if I could stop for just a moment.

Freddie sat next me and said, “We have been through it all Miss Ross. Would you agree?” I agreed with him. He then said to me, “I have something to tell you.” My heart was racing and I was pissed. What was he going to tell me? Had he really interrupted my work time to distract me with some bad news? I turned to him and said, “What the hell you got to tell me?”

Freddie laughed at me, which made me madder. He grabbed my hand and said, “There is something that I should have done a long time ago. I have spent the past five years of my life thinking of our relationship and where this would go, and now I know where we need to go. I want you to be my lover, my friend, and my everything for the rest of my life.” He put a silver diamond ring on my finger and asked, “Jacqueline DeShawn Ross will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

I could not believe what he had just asked me. There was an awkward silence while I tried to give him an answer. I was relieved that I finally received the promise that I hoped for back when I first realized I was pregnant. Tears were streaming down my face as I said simply said, “Yes.” I was happy. I was satisfied and most importantly I was Black, Born female, Beautiful, and ‘Bout to be somebody’s wife.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis/Conclusion**

One common assumption about Black single mothers is that they are inadequate and incompetent, unable to raise children who are functional members of society, and overall, bad mothers (Crooms, 1995). Black single mothers are often characterized as bad mothers because it is most common for their circumstances to be the antithesis of the traditional family discussed in earlier chapters. The narratives in the previous chapter show that the negative assumptions about Black single mothers can be dispelled in the Black women's daily living experiences and through what Collins (1990/2000) refers to as the power of self-definition.

Self-definition is a tool that Black women use to encourage and define themselves amidst the constant scrutiny of outsiders who negatively define them. In a blog on the Crunk Feminist Collective website Ashoncrawley (2012) suggests that Black women are “theologians and philosophers of maternity” and no one can understand the philosophy of a Black mother better than a Black mother herself (Sec.2). Outsiders, namely Moynihan (1965) have attempted to define the philosophies of Black maternity, but the ways in which Black single mother self-define resists controlling images, as seen with the participants of this study. Self-definition is Black women's way of exhibiting behaviors contrary to the negative ideologies discussed by Collins (1990/2000). It gives them room to unapologetically redefine themselves in the face of opposition, as shown in the narratives of this study. These narratives teach us that there is plenty of room for the redefinition of Black single motherhood.

The subsequent pages analyze each narrative from the previous chapter to highlight several themes such as religion, other mothers, protection, unapologetic confidence, and

ambivalence to discuss how the participants reimagine their lives as Black single mothers. The purpose of this section is to show how these narratives individually and collectively work to dispel themes of inadequacy and incompetence often used in reference to Black single mothers.

### **Sam**

The first story about Sam highlights several themes that redefine Black single motherhood and dispel assumptions of inadequacy and incompetence. The first time Sam dispels these assumptions about Black single mothers is her paternal relationship and how she grew up with both parents and her siblings. Sam decided to raise her children alone and she made the choice to avoid settling for incompetent companionship from the men she invested time in. Sam's life as a Black single mother dispels the myth that Black single motherhood is a generational inheritance because she chose single motherhood and she did not come from a single mother headed household.

Sam's early life contributes to the standards that she set for the men in her life. The influence of Sam's relationship with her father created the theme of unapologetic confidence that is present in her narrative. Sam took ownership for her part in the demise of her romantic relationships but she also made it clear that she was not a victim.

Sam's self-definition was present when she was initially ambivalent about motherhood and pregnancy. In her narrative, she discusses how she was threatened by her aunt and told that if she did not abort her first pregnancy that she would be ostracized from the family. Sam found the strength to reimagine her life to make it inclusive of motherhood and she decided to keep her baby even though she faced unfavorable odds.

Moynihan (1965) would argue that Sam's narrative is filled with disadvantages especially since she is raising four Black sons with no father. (sec 4.26). Sam's narrative resists Moynihan's argument about Black families being disadvantaged when headed by women as she discussed how her family dynamic is not stereotypical. Sam's family dynamic does not include welfare or a disadvantage in education. Sam's home is in a predominately White subdivision in which many of her neighbors appear to be traditional White families and her narrative resists Moynihan's claims of disadvantage as she dwells amongst those whom he viewed to have the most advantages in society.

The theme of paternal relationships is not only present with Sam and her father, but it also revolves around her multiple children with multiple men. Collins (1990/2000) acknowledges the ways in which others view this as a characteristic for bad mothers simply because it is not in line with the traditional family template. Sam initiated this theme in the second paragraph of her narrative when she described the way people respond to the number of children she has. Sam also antagonizes the idea of having her children with multiple men by referring to herself as an "equal opportunity employer." This shows Sam's acceptance of her situation and how she has participated in the power of self-definition to dispel negative assumptions about herself as a Black single mother.

Sam's narrative tells the story of a woman who redefined and reimagined family dynamics that worked best for herself and for her children. She exhibited a desire to protect herself and her children from the incompetence and inadequacy that they could have faced, not at Sam's hands, but at the hands of their fathers

## **LaQuitha**

The second story about LaQuitha highlights many of the same themes as Sam's narrative with a few new themes. LaQuitha's narrative dispels the assumptions of incompetence and inadequacy even beginning with her mother's absence. Collins (1990/2000) discussed controlling images such as the matriarch who is often defined as a "bad mother" due to the belief that she does not exhibit behaviors of the traditional gender role. She is emasculating and usually the provider for her family because her man has left her in the wake of her emasculating behavior (p.70). LaQuitha's narrative resists the matriarchal controlling image as she reconciles her mother's absence with love as opposed to negligence because her mother's absence created an opportunity for her to provide for her children. This portion of her narrative dispels those negative assumptions because it shows that LaQuitha's mother understood that providing for her family meant she would have to sacrifice some time with them. LaQuitha's narrative introduces the idea that single motherhood could be a generational inheritance. LaQuitha is a single mother and she came from a single parent household. However, her mother came from a household with both parents which argues that single motherhood is not always a generational inheritance.

Although her biological mother was single, LaQuitha's grandmother played a significant role in her life as another mother. LaQuitha discussed how her grandmother stood in the gap for her mother while she worked most of the time. LaQuitha discusses the disconnect she had with mom for much of her life due to her mother's absence. The interesting part about this disconnect is that it exists because her mother was not home enough in the early years so it caused

confusion. In LaQuitha's narrative, she discusses how she refers to her grandmother as "Mama" and she calls her mother by her first name. The theme of other mother comes into effect in LaQuitha's narrative as Hogan, Hao, and Parish (1990) discussed the ways in which Black families have kin networks to provide support to one another (p.798). This theme resists the traditional family myth as it also shows that other family dynamics can provide a healthy environment.

LaQuitha's early life created a lack of self-confidence as she felt pressured to what satisfied her mother and whomever she sought approval. LaQuitha discussed how becoming a mother gave her confidence. LaQuitha, like Sam, was threatened by a loved one to abort her baby. In LaQuitha's case, her child's father insisted she have an abortion and this caused a rift between them. It also helped LaQuitha reimagine her journey without Jeff's support. LaQuitha's first declaration of her unapologetic confidence occurs when she dismissed Jeff's feelings about their daughter having LaQuitha's last name. This was LaQuitha's way of creating her own family dynamic for herself and for her baby.

One difference between LaQuitha's narrative and Sam's narrative is that LaQuitha did not express any feelings of ambivalence regarding motherhood. Even though she mentions that she became a mother sooner than she planned, but she adjusted without support her family and her child's father. LaQuitha remained determined to provide a good life for her baby regardless of the inclusion of the father.

LaQuitha's determination for taking care of her baby was so strong that she refused to mandate financial support from Jeff. LaQuitha's argument on child support is that it painted a

picture of desperation that she was not willing to invest in. She felt that accepting child support from Jeff would excuse and further perpetuate assumptions of Black single mothers as “gold diggers” who use their children as personal ransoms. Although her feelings about child support can be debated, her argument is her way of defying stereotypes about Black single mothers.

LaQuitha participates in self-definition by referring to herself as brand new. She redefined herself although she was expected to be a certain way based on the expectations of others. Her story shows how Black single mothers’ children can propel their dreams as opposed to postponing their dreams. LaQuitha’s life revolved around pleasing others until she became a mother and became brand new.

### **Natasha**

The third story about Natasha highlights some of the same themes as Sam and LaQuitha’s narratives, but there is one theme that is especially different. Natasha expressed her disdain for being a single mother. Natasha expressed strong feelings of anger because she had to raise her children without the support of their fathers.

Natasha seemed to be on her way to obtaining the traditional family myth when she was married to the father of her two sons, but that did not last and she experienced single motherhood during her marriage. Natasha raises an especially important realization for traditional family myth supporters. Natasha argues that a woman can be married and still be a single mother if she is the one who is solely responsible for her children, aside from the father’s financial obligations to the family. According to Natasha’s narrative, a man can be separated from his children and still perform his financial obligations.

Natasha stated that she received child support from her children's fathers, but never did she describe any act of malice toward the children's fathers while seeking support as the controlling image of "baby mama" depicts Black single mothers on child support (Cooper 2007, p.322). Child support did not control Natasha's parental impact. In fact, her narrative discusses how she would rather her children have a positive relationship with their fathers as opposed to the monthly stipend that seemed to replace the paternal relationship she wanted them to have. Natasha's desire for her children to have healthy paternal relationships stemmed from the relationship she had with her own father. She discussed how she and her father were "homeboys" and he was her favorite person.

Although Natasha felt that her children's fathers were missing out on how excellent they were, she also knew that her heavenly father would always be with her family making sure that nothing lacked in her household. Religion is an important theme in Natasha's narrative because religion has assisted her with re-imagining her family dynamics. Natasha was not shy about her unhappiness with being a single mother, but rather than viewing it as a punishment she viewed it as God's way of letting her know that she was qualified and to handle the responsibility.

In fact, Natasha feels that God believed in her ability so much that in addition to being a mother of four children, she is also an "other mother" to her niece and nephew due to her sister's death. As Collins (1997) states, Black women feel a responsibility for each other's children thus the concept of other mother is most prominent in the Black community (p.326). Natasha discussed the fact that she always wanted to be a mother. She states that her maternal instincts manifested at the age of sixteen although she did not become a mother until she was twenty-five

years old. Natasha discussed that taking care of six children often turned her into superwoman. As Superwoman, Natasha feels responsible for every aspect of her children's life. She is responsible for feeding, clothing, and providing shelter for them as well as protecting them and insuring their emotional gratification.

The idea that mothering is more than food, clothes, and shelter came to Natasha from her mother. Although it can be interpreted that Natasha and her father shared a fondness for one another, she gives her mother credit for teaching her what being a Black woman required. Natasha discussed how Black women are often in positions of double jeopardy due to race and gender.

According to Natasha, Black women are often forced to be super human as due to the double jeopardies of race and gender. However, even super heroes have sidekicks to assist them, and lack thereof can create a spirit of ambivalence, which is what has happened to Natasha. Natasha's theme of ambivalence is not directed at motherhood but at single motherhood. Although she is faced with raising her children alone, which she admittedly despises, she is still resilient and confident that God's plan is greater than her and her six children.

### **Chantella**

The fourth story about Chantella is quite different from the other narratives in the previous chapter. Chantella does not refer to herself as single mother at all, but rather, a mother who is single. The most prevalent themes in Chantella's narrative are reimagination and self-definition. Chantella refuses to refer to herself as a single mother because for her it means that she is allowing her circumstances to dictate who she is and not the contrary. One reason in

particular that Chantella's narrative avoids referencing her family as a single mother dynamic is because of the kin networks she has available to her as discussed by Hogan, Hao, and Parish (1990, p.798). Chantella credits her knowledge of life as a Black mother to the things she experiences every day. According to Chantella, being a Black woman is a new experience daily and being a single mother amplifies this experience.

According to Chantella, her early life did not prepare her for motherhood. It was not until she actually became a mother that she realized what it takes to be a good mother. Chantella engaged in the theme of reimagination when she argued that motherhood cannot be executed properly until women understand womanhood. Chantella argued that changing the way we think about womanhood will create a genre of more prepared mothers.

Although her narrative is different from the other participants, it also shares similarities. For example, Chantella's ambivalence for motherhood was extremely strong. In fact, her ambivalence changed the way she lived her life. It changed the way she communicated with people and it even created some depression in her life, which is a theme that was not discussed by the other participants.

Chantella's depression took place during both her pregnancies as she attempted to learn how she would be to impact the lives of her children in a positive way. She discussed how she retreated and became withdrawn from life, as she knew it, so that she could prepare herself for motherhood. The thought of having to create a life for someone else while attempting to figure life out for herself was especially trying for Chantella during both of her pregnancies as she revealed in her narrative. Just as with Sam, LaQuitha, and Natasha, her ambivalence subsided,

and according to Chantella, this took place when she reimagined motherhood through her understanding of womanhood.

Chantella's understanding of womanhood also led to her understanding of manhood as she discussed the theme of paternal relationships regarding her daughters and their fathers. Chantella was not angry with them for being absent, she reconciled their absence with the pathologies they faced within themselves as Black men and she made sure that she did not take credit for their incompetence and absences. After interviewing Chantella, I determined that she thinks ahead of the present. She discussed how she plans to address the absences of their fathers with her daughters and how she plans to use that conversation as way to help them avoid single motherhood as a generational inheritance.

Although she admits that believing in a power higher than herself is necessary for strength in hard times, she does not participate in organized religion. Chantella credits her strength to spirituality as opposed to religious doctrine. Chantella was critical of the lessons taught to Black single mothers in Black churches because it teaches them to make the best out of a bad situation as opposed embracing their responsibilities as women and as mothers. Chantella's narrative teaches us that motherhood would not exist without the appreciation of womanhood and this lesson is never over, but it is re-invented every day.

### **Gramma and Me**

The final narratives were the most challenging to write because they belong to my grandmother and me. Gramma and I have the same relationship that Janie and Nanny shared in *Their Eyes were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937/2006 p. 21). Gramma raised me and she has

always been vocal about the fact that wanted my life to be free from the struggles she experienced in her life the same way Nanny did with Janie (Hurstons, 1937/2006 p.21). Gramma has always protected me and her other children from her emotions and from the intimate details of her life. I never understood why she was so protective of her past, but when I experienced motherhood it was clear why she was so guarded. After asking Gramma the same questions as the other participants I saw many of the same themes. Gramma had both parents growing up, but was mostly cared for by her mother and sister who was an “other mother” to her which is common for Black families as stated by Collins (1997).

In many ways Gramma’s narrative tells us that the myth of single motherhood as a generational inheritance is not always true. Gramma grew up in a traditional family but she still ended up being a single mother. Prior to being a single mother of four children Gramma was married and had what is considered to be the “traditional family” as she and my grandfather raised their four children in the home together (Nicholson, 1997). My grandparents divorced after thirteen years of marriage and this left Gramma in a place she was not expecting to be, especially after overcoming her ambivalence for motherhood.

Gramma spent a great deal of her time after her divorce reading her Bible and understanding God’s plan for her life. Religion has always been especially important to Gramma, which is the reason my journey as a single mother was so hard for her to accept. The theme of religion is used as a tool in Gramma’s narrative to redefine her family dynamics placing God at the head of her family as opposed to herself. Gramma discussed how biblical scriptures govern the way she raised her children and the way she lives her life.

The final narratives are connected because there is a familial bond between Gramma and me. Gramma did not want single motherhood to be passed down to her children nor to her grandchildren just as Nanny did not want Janie to experience life as the “mule of the world” (Hurstons, 1937/2006 p.21). I never wanted to be a disappointment to Gramma, but I know that continuing the cycle of single motherhood was not pleasing for her. I remember feeling shocked when Gramma told me she never wanted children during her interview. This was shocking to me because she went from not wanting to be a mother at all to being a single mother of four.

My mother was pregnant when she was sixteen, as discussed in the introduction, and this was the first time my family assumed single motherhood was a generational inheritance. I have spent most of my life feeling bad for my mother’s death. Not only because she is no longer living, but also because her death gave Gramma another child to raise. The other mother theme in my story is centered on Gramma sacrificing her life and taking care of me.

Moynihan (1965) argues that Black single mothers are bad mothers because his argument focuses on the fact that there is no man present in the home to provide balance. Although there was no man present to assist Gramma with raising my two uncles, my aunt, and me, I always felt as if we had everything we needed. Some of the things I wanted were not always in my reach, but I cannot recall ever being without the things I needed. Although she raised us without a man, Gramma was a good mother and a great other mother to me.

I believe readers of this project have the opportunity to view a few different sides of Gramma. The first time Gramma is mentioned is during the brief encounter of my fear of her conservative opinion of my pregnancy. Due to the fact that she is a single mother, she was never

shy about telling me that it was not a life that she wanted me to have. The second side of Gramma can be seen during her narrative. Her narrative discussed her ambivalence with motherhood, her marriage, and her religion as a blueprint for having a successful family in the wake of some unflattering circumstances including her divorce. Readers also have the opportunity to view Gramma in my eyes throughout my narrative.

Gramma and I are similar to Nanny and Janie, because Gramma shared similar ideas about womanhood and motherhood with me. Gramma always said to me, “You will deal with some extra things in life because you’re Black and because you’re a woman, but God will be there to show you what to do, I’m just here to help you get ready.” I never really understood what that meant until I read Nanny’s words to Janie (Hurstun, 1937/2006 p.21) and reflected on her interview. Gramma was telling me that life would be challenging for me because of my race and gender and she knew that single motherhood would amplify the difficulties that were ahead of me. I remember the night I finally had the courage to tell her I was pregnant. She responded by saying, “Life for you is challenging enough and now you are having a baby. Freddie is not guaranteed to be there, so what you gon’ do?” I remember being angry with her for saying that, but in retrospect she was telling me that I needed to practice the power of self-definition although she did not say those words directly.

My narrative includes the theme of self-definition from the moment I discussed the experience of discovering my pregnancy. I mentioned being accepted to graduate school and learning about my pregnancy immediately after my acceptance. Many people attempted to discourage my decision to continue my education with a baby on the way because a good mother

rearranges her plans for her children. Although I did not know it at the time, I exhibited the power of self-definition when I chose to continue my education. In my eyes, a good mother knows that investing in her own future is equal to investing in her children's future. For this reason alone, my narrative dispels assumptions of incompetence and inadequacy.

The second theme in my narrative is ambivalence. I was ambivalent about womanhood, motherhood, and single motherhood. I discussed how becoming pregnant reconciled the issues I had accepting my gender as well as my race. My ambivalence with motherhood subsided for the most part when Kody arrived, but I also dealt with envy toward Freddie because I felt that he was a better parent than me. I had to reconcile my decision of going back to school and work by understanding that I was creating a promising future for my child.

My ambivalence with single motherhood was tested when Freddie and I actually parted ways and I had to live out my fear of raising my son alone. This ambivalence suddenly turned into acceptance as I began to reimagine my life as a Black single mother. During this time, the theme of other mother is available as I was not willing to share my relationship status with anyone but Chantella and she became Kody's other mother and supported me by raising him and educating him while I was at work and school as a part of my kin network (Hogan, Hao and Parish, 1990).

Moynihan (1965) argued that a good mother has a moral obligation to her children to raise them in "traditional families," but for me the absence of Freddie in our home redefined my relationship with my son. His absence gave me an unapologetic confidence about my

capabilities as a mother and I realized that protecting my son from chaos was my moral obligation, not giving him a “traditional family.”

My experience as a Black single mother also gave me the opportunity to connect with my participants. Although there are several similarities in my narrative and my participants’ narratives, my current relationship status is no longer single. I do not consider myself a single mother now, even though I am not married yet. I feel that my connection with my participants comes from my family tradition of single motherhood and from my own personal experience, even temporarily, of raising my son alone.

My narrative connects with all the other narratives on many levels. Similar to many of the other participants, I experienced several moments of ambivalence throughout my pregnancy. My participants told stories of their children’s fathers being incompetent and invisible in their children’s lives. Although this was not the case in my narrative, I lived in constant fear that I would end up raising my son alone because I started my journey as a mother with no commitment of marriage from Freddie.

After completing interviews with Sam, Natasha, and Gramma, I quickly learned that marriage does not prevent single motherhood. However, my narrative was rooted in the desire for a promise that I would not have to raise my son as a single mother and marriage was the only way I could imagine my security. Although my family tradition revolves around single motherhood, my narrative proves that the power of self-definition and re-imagination are effective tools in dispelling assumptions of incompetence and inadequacy.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to their participation in this project, I explained to each participant what the title of this project meant. Initially, I wanted the title to reflect women who were overexerted and underappreciated, but had wisdom about their lives and their experiences. All of the participants, with the exception of Chantella, went along with the title. Chantella asked me, “What the hell is a mule and why are you calling me that?” I explained to her that just as Nanny explained to Janie and as Gramma explained to me: “We are the ultimate burden barriers and when you add a baby it don’t get no easier.” She agreed with me and embraced the title.

Upon completing interviews the narratives changed the meaning of “mules and pearls.” I no longer wanted my participants to be viewed as wise mules, but I wanted their inner beauty and value to be recognized beyond overexertion and underappreciation. I learned that the pearls do not only represent the wisdom, but the pearls represent the women. These women are beautiful individually, but together on the same metaphorical string they complement Black family dynamics like the perfect accessory.

The six narratives in this study show that Black single mothers dispel myths through their lived experiences. These narratives teach us that Daniel Moynihan (1965) and traditional family myth supporters were wrong about Black mother headed households. The participants of this study did not define themselves as emasculating, but each woman acknowledged that she was positioned to act assertively to provide a stable environment for her children. These Black women do not live to emasculate men, but they live to create healthy environments for their children. For the women who participated in this study, their family’s emotional health is far

more important than perpetuating the traditional family myth. The traditional family myth is so problematic that not even the White families it was designed for can live up to it.

This study contributes to a broader understanding of Black single mother headed households and it also shows that generalizations cannot be made about this demographic. The images of Black single mothers on welfare and government assistance did not apply to these participants. Although these women are single mothers none of them perpetuated the negative ideologies often associated with Black single mothers. Each participant reimagined single motherhood in her own way by creating her own family dynamics.

One specific shortcoming of this study is that it did not include male voices. Although the specific focus on this study was centered on the lived experiences of Black single mothers, the male voice of the fathers could have been privileged to broaden the understanding of Black family dynamics. A future study should interview fathers of children raised in Black mother headed households to uncover the reasons Black men are absent from a male perspective.

Another shortcoming of this study is that it does not privilege the voices of the children being raised by the single mothers. Future research, with proper protocol, should research how children raised in Black single mother headed households feel about their family dynamics. Although these elements were missing, this study thoroughly answered the research questions and provided answers to the ways Black single mothers live and experience motherhood.

Initially I did not want my family dynamic to include singleness. I experienced that dynamic with Gramma and many other mothers in my family and it was important to me to align with the traditional family myth. I wanted my family dynamics to look like Claire Huxtable's as

Chantella's narrative discussed. I wanted the husband, the children, the job, and the happily ever after. When I lived through my single motherhood I realized that being a single mother is not about marriage, but about mothering while being single. Further, being a single mother does not necessarily equate parenting alone. The difference between my narrative and my participants is that my narrative included the theme of dual parenting as Freddie was involved in raising Kody with me, even when we were not together. None of my participants experienced dual parenting and were solely responsible for raising their children.

Each of the participants accepted their role as single mothers, embraced single motherhood, and created their own definitions of what a single mother looks like. Sam taught us that a Black single mother can look like an equal opportunity employer. LaQuitha taught us that a Black single mother can look brand new. Natasha taught us that a Black single mother can look like a gift from God. Chantella taught us that a Black single mother looks like a mother who is single, and Gramma taught us that a Black single mother looks like a pearl.

Although each of these depictions is different, they each contribute to dispelling Moynihan's (1965) belief that Black single mothers destroy Black families. We are socially conditioned to view single motherhood as a constraint and a negative family dynamic in comparison to the traditional family myth, but the narratives of mules and pearls gives us insight into the lived experiences of Black single mothers in their own words.

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## Appendix

### **Interview Questions for Participants in Of Mules and Pearls Study**

1. What does being a Black woman mean to you?
2. What does being a mother mean to you?
3. What is your definition of a single mother?
4. How did your journey as a parent begin?
5. How did you become a single mother?
6. How does being a Black single mother affect your daily life?
7. Do you view being a Black single mother as a constraint? What other constraints might you, personally face, (i.e. sexual orientation, religious practices, etc.)?
8. How does religion influence your decisions as a single parent, if at all?
9. What was your family life like when you were growing up?
10. What were your preconceived notions about motherhood before you had children?
11. Was there any indication that you would be raising your children alone prior to becoming a single mother?
12. How do you feel about being a single mother?
13. In what ways can single motherhood be viewed as a generational curse?
14. How was your relationship with your parent(s)?
15. In what ways has being a single mother influenced your relationships with others?  
Others being your children, their father(s), your family, friends, etc.

16. If there were anything you could tell a Black woman who is soon to be a Black single mother, what would it be?