

Through My Mother's Eyes: History, Memory, and Trauma in Narratives of the  
"Strong Black Woman"

By

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Rubennia Willis Woods, who was the inspiration for this work, and my husband Mark G. Stewart who believed in me when I did not believe in myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and offer my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Martha Norkunas, who has supported me through this entire project and ensured I had all of the tools and assistance that I needed. Dr. Norkunas, I will always remember the way that you encouraged me and pushed me to produce this body of work which I am incredibly proud of. We did it!

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To my mother, Rubennia Willis Woods, thank you for allowing me to share your story and for giving me the tools I needed to become the woman that I am today. None of this would have been possible without you. I hope this work makes you as proud as it does me because it is as much yours as it is mine. I love you!

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Black womanhood through the lenses of postmemory, trauma and survival, social capital, and the strong Black woman archetype.

Using the life narrative of one Black woman from Atlanta, Georgia, this work demonstrates how the strong Black woman archetype is directly related to the African American postmemory of slavery that has been ingrained into the lives of Black women for generations. It exemplifies how the strong Black woman model is both a tool of survival and a trauma response and is at once traumatizing and fortifying to the individual Black woman. It also demonstrates how multigenerational maladaptive behaviors, violence, and rigid obedience training are rooted in slavery and continue to be traumatizing. It is within this context that the strong Black woman identity is formed. The narrator's story reveals how survival networks, often headed, or strongly supported by Black women, have been essential to the survivance of the Black community, often acting through the Black church or other mutual aid associations.

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## Introduction: The Crucible

Black women have a long history of being the backbone of their families and their communities. They have been the caretakers and pillars of strength for centuries, but they have also been a perpetual dual minority, in terms of race and gender, struggling to find their place in American society and the world. These strong, maternal figures have also been agents of change for the Black community. Recently, there has been increased interest in the study of Black women and the pivotal roles they have occupied in various movements throughout time.<sup>1</sup> But what about the everyday woman? What about the Black woman whose only goals are to feed her children and make it until tomorrow? The voices of these women offer significant insights into the social history of Black women in the American South. Women's history becomes more nuanced as the stories of these everyday Black women, often lost in the shadow of Black female social movement leaders, are made available. The life history of a

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see: Bruce A. Glasrud, Merline Pitre, and Angela Boswell, *Black Women in Texas History*, Vol. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A & M University (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); Tara T. Green, *Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); Elizabeth A. Roumell, ArCasia D. James-Galloway, "Social Movements, Community Education, and the Fight for Racial Justice: Black Women and Social Transformation," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* (2021).

working-class Black woman from Atlanta serves as a window into the lives of many Black women born in the 1950s and 1960s.

Our individual memories are an integral part of our identities. They determine the way we act, the way we think, and the way we interpret the world around us. Likewise, postmemory can have a lasting impact on how individuals relate to the world around them. Postmemory refers to the relationship that a “post” generation has to the traumatic experiences of those that came before them. These experiences are “remembered” through the stories, images, and behaviors that the post-generation grew up with. Perhaps the most typical example of postmemory comes from the subsequent generation of Holocaust survivors. The stories, images, and other forms of media that they grew up with, no doubt, profoundly influenced their worldview and the ways in which they operate in the world. The intergenerational dissemination of the “memory” of traumatic experiences, and the emotional condition of trauma, differs from actual memory. Per Marianne Hirsch, “Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is “post”; but, at the same time, [...] it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects.”<sup>2</sup> When referring to her own (post)memory and stories shared with her, my mother remarked that “It kind of makes you the person that

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 31.

you are. You are those little stories.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, individuals can also recognize the importance of postmemory in the formation of their own identities.

African American women— indeed African American people in general— have experienced a form of postmemory that goes back generations. In the American context, this relates back to the institution of chattel slavery.<sup>4</sup> The legacies of that institution have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of all African American people, and for American women of African descent, this is particularly true. The continued refusal of mainstream society to acknowledge and accept her vulnerability as both a woman and an African American, forces her to endure transgenerational racism and sexism. America’s ongoing disregard of the combined effects of these attitudes towards Black women imposes additional strain on their collective self-awareness.

History has taught the African American woman to work diligently and to bear her burdens in silence. Postmemory has bred in her the idea that she must be the scion of strength, resistant to mental and physical traumas. Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) best exemplified this in her speech at the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio when she said:

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<sup>3</sup> Rubennia Woods, interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this see: Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

That man over there says that women need to be helped into  
carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place  
everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-  
puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at  
me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered  
into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I  
could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it  
- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne  
thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I  
cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And  
ain't I a woman?<sup>5</sup>

The context and content of her message, which is sometimes used in secondary school curriculum, reinforces the mental image of Black women being somehow more physically and emotionally durable.<sup>6</sup> It also highlights the defeminization of the Black woman under the slave system in the United States. Enslaved Black women in America were essentially stripped of their womanhood and treated the same as enslaved Black men. In addition to bearing the same burdens as men,

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<sup>5</sup> Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman?" Speech, Women's Convention, 1851, Akron, Ohio.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this visit:

[www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/standards/ss/Social\\_Studies\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/standards/ss/Social_Studies_Standards.pdf).

they were expected to bear children as well as endure physical and sexual abuse, while continuing to nurture and mother the community of enslaved people and the White family they were bound to.<sup>7</sup> The expectation of Black women to stoically endure is further evident in the lasting stereotype of the “strong Black woman” that many Black women have internalized. No matter where they hail from in the African diaspora, they are all influenced by a transgenerational inheritance that is rooted in the trauma suffered by their ancestors. In some respects, the United States’ slave past is less history to African Americans than it is (post)memory. Marianne Hirsch explains that it is the “... presence of embodied and affective experience in the process of transmission that is best described by the notion of memory as opposed to history.”<sup>8</sup>

The history of slavery is well documented in scholarly literature as well as popular media in the United States.<sup>9</sup> For some Black people, the access to

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<sup>7</sup> Arlene E. Edwards, “Community Mothering: The Relationship Between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women,” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 2, No. 2 (2000), 8; for more see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985) and Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing A Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, 33.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this see: John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1967); Jodi Skipper, *Behind the Big House: Reconciling, Slavery, Race, and Heritage in the U.S. South* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022); Alexandra J. Finley, *An Intimate Economy: Enslaved Women, Work, and America’s Domestic Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University

pictures, literature, ancestry data, family histories, and various primary sources on the matter of slavery create a very real affective link to that part of their past.

Going back to Truth's speech, it is one way in which the myth of the "strong Black woman" has been perpetuated throughout generations, creating a vivid connection to the traumatic experiences of enslaved women. It sets a standard by which Black women and girls measure themselves. "Memory signals as an affective link to the past—a sense [...] of a material 'living connection'—and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony."<sup>10</sup> Sojourner Truth is but one example of strong Black womanhood. American Poet Laureate, Maya Angelou (1928-2014), also continues to inspire generations of girls and women through her writing. In her poem entitled, *Still I Rise*, she wrote the following uplifting and edifying words: "You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I rise."<sup>11</sup> Writing at a time when race and gender bias were still at an all-time high, Angelou produced many works that encouraged her readers to remain resilient and to persevere through the

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Press, 2015); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise," 1978.

hardships of discrimination.<sup>12</sup> Postmemories of slavery and other racial and gender-based traumas from the past continue to influence African American women, their families, and their communities at large through media, literature, art, and personal narratives.

To be clear, the “strong Black woman” archetype is a standard that expects and requires Black women to be strong, invulnerable, independent, resilient, and caretakers. This is a result of the traumas inflicted on African American women since slavery. Enslaved women were expected to work and be caregivers despite the violence, oppression, and degradation they endured. Through being stripped of their children, being sexually assaulted, beaten, demeaned, and bearing witness to brutality against other enslaved people, including loved ones, these women were expected to endure it all. Taylor Geyton, Nia Johnson, and Katrina Ross wrote that, “The expectations for Black women to work despite oppression and violence was rationalized through categorizing Black women as physically and psychologically durable.”<sup>13</sup> In “‘I’m good’: Examining the Internalization of the Strong Black Woman Archetype,”

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this see: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, (New York: Random House, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Taylor Geyton, Nia Johnson, and Katrina Ross, “‘I’m Good’: Examining the Internalization of the Strong Black Woman Archetype,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (2020): 6.

Geyton et. al. also state that “Black women in turn are groomed to adopt an identity rooted in strength as a rite of passage for the preservation of the family system and become the gatekeepers of the greater Black community.”<sup>14</sup> In my mother’s own words, she confesses that she, “... grew up in a house full of strong women. When the men stepped out, the women had to step up... all the strong role models in my life have been [Black] women.”<sup>15</sup> The strong Black woman archetype is passed down from generation to generation through observation, media, and personal narratives intended to foster self-pride, culture, and strategies for managing the external stressors of being both Black and woman in the United States.<sup>16</sup> This archetype is closely linked to postmemory and trauma.

The African American woman occupies a unique place in the social structure and history of this country and her story (or herstory) reflects her dual subordination as Black and woman. The stories and lessons that African American women share from one generation to the next are important but likewise, so are the stories that are not shared. Untold stories are less connected to postmemory but still an important concept in understanding the internalization of the “strong Black woman” typecast. In those cases, Black

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<sup>14</sup> Geyton, et al., 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Geyton, et al., 5-6.

women are taught to be strong for the sake of private traumas that their foremothers experienced yet refuse to talk about. In his book, *They Say in Harlan County*, Alessandro Portelli briefly touches on the topic of slavery in Appalachia. In response to testimony from descendants of enslaved people Portelli wrote that “The [B]lack memory of slavery is etched in sad and angry silences, painful omissions, and periphrases.”<sup>17</sup> These silences have only added to the perception of strength that enshrouds Black women. Eschewing outward expressions of pain and trauma only added to the perception of strength that covers Black women.

Attitudes and behaviors that are taught and reinforced by our parents, especially our mothers, tend to be rooted in traumas they have experienced in their own pasts. Simply put, there are behaviors and attitudes that are passed down from mother to daughter that are rooted in traumas that they do not fully articulate to their daughters. For instance, sexual assault survivors are unlikely to reveal the details of such an assault to their children but the impulse to protect one’s young pushes mothers to teach them to safeguard themselves as best they can under threatening or precarious circumstances.

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<sup>17</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 53.

This thesis seeks to strengthen the body of literature available that connects the experiences of African American women to postmemory and the “Strong Black Woman” archetype. Through interviews with my mother, I examine how a version of postmemory operates in the life narrative of one African American woman and connect postmemory to the “Strong Black Woman” archetype. My mother’s story illuminates the truth and the fallacy of the Strong Black Woman archetype. In the following chapters, I will discuss the resiliency of African American women and the importance of social capital in narratives of survival in African American communities, survival and survivance of Black women from urban communities, and the effects the “strong Black woman” schema on my mother’s life.<sup>18</sup> I am concerned with one woman’s story and the way it reflects the effects of postmemory and trauma and my mother’s embodiment of the “Strong Black Woman” archetype, yet I argue that her story is representative of larger patterns in Black women’s history.

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<sup>18</sup> \*Though Black and African American identities can have more nuanced definitions, in this work, I use the two interchangeably in reference to all people of African descent born in the United States.

## PART I: It Takes a Village: Networks of Survival in Black Communities

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*“... as long as we were in Summer Hill, we were in our bubble.”*

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It was once the case that the Black Community, a defined entity of its own, was a self-sustaining body that depended on interconnectivity. My mother, Rubennia, was born into a Black community that relied on social capital and extensive extended family networks.<sup>19</sup> Neighbor relied on neighbor, and family relied on family to survive the hardships that plagued the Black community of her youth. My mother was born at a time when these old ways of surviving through mutual aid were still very much alive. She fondly recalls, at one point, living with ten or more relatives in one three-bedroom house, “We all lived on Woodson Street, but that was a bigger house. Those were some good times.”<sup>20</sup> According to her, it was not uncommon for multiple generations of a family to live under one roof for survival. “Everyone I knew had a grandparent living with

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the effects of social capital in Black communities see: Keon L. Gilbert, Yusuf Ransome, Lorraine T. Dean, Jerelle DeCaille, and Ichiro Kawachi, “Social Capital, Black Social Mobility, and Health Disparities,” *Annual Review of Public Health* 43 (January): 173-91.

<sup>20</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

them... and there was always someone looking out for you in the neighborhood.”<sup>21</sup>

My mother and her six siblings were raised by their parents, Harold Ruby Willis and Mary Louise Boyd, in the Summer Hill (also seen as Summerhill) community in southeast Atlanta, Georgia. Once heralded as the “Black Mecca” in the United States, Atlanta has long been noted for its seemingly progressive attitude towards race relations. This is not to say that racial tensions were absent in Atlanta, the race riots of 1906 speak to the contrary.<sup>22</sup> There were, however, stark differences that set Atlanta apart from most other Southern metropolises. As noted by Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, “... [B]lack exerted remarkable influence in Atlanta affairs on the strength of professional and business leadership. The social structure of Atlanta's black community in 1940 contained a sizable ‘upper class’ drawn from business and professional circles and linked by affiliation and tradition to the black educational institutions that made up the Atlanta University Center.”<sup>23</sup> They also reveal that, “Atlanta had a rich tradition of biracial political coalition, prompted at least in part by a sense of

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<sup>21</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, February 6, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this see: Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009) and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2015), 52.

*noblesse oblige* among Atlanta's upper-class whites whose business and political contacts reached to middle-class conservatives in the black community."<sup>24</sup> At this same time however, per historian Ronald H. Bayor,

One of the common themes that ran through Atlanta's economic history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the attempt to subordinate the black community. Both public and private policy decisions left a large segment of the city's population in the lowest economic positions, although the black community, particularly through the Urban League, resisted these policies and worked to change them. For a city so concerned with economic growth, its white leaders were amazingly shortsighted to allow the city's significant black population to endure low wages, inadequate training, and persistent discrimination. Race based policies through the decades also set the stage for the controversy over affirmative action and joint ventures, a conflict that began in the 1960s and has continued. During the period of the black mayors, race remained a

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<sup>24</sup> Silver and Moeser, 12.

shaping element in the city's economy as efforts were made to secure an equal place for Atlanta's blacks.<sup>25</sup>

While Bayor seems to contradict Silver and Moeser, both scholars were right. Atlanta was a complex social arena experiencing the push and pull effects of economic progress and continued racial and economic discrimination. While middle class Black people were making strides in having their voices heard, Black people of lower socioeconomic status were still being left behind in the wake of the limited progress in achieving socio-economic equity.

TS: I want to go back, and I want to follow up first with some of your grandparents' pre-Civil Rights activities. What were they doing? What do you recall about their day-to-day lives, pre-Civil Rights?

RW: They were just working. Most of them were domestics. My grandfather on my father's side worked for the railroad. His wife, my grandmother, did not work. She was a housewife. On my mother's side, my grandmother -- she was a domestic. She worked for one of the prominent lawyers in Atlanta. Her sister, who she was very close to, she worked in the hotel industry.

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 93-94.

TS: Do you know what she did in the hotel industry?

RW: Maid. Cleaned up.<sup>26</sup>

Known as, “the city too busy to hate,” a phrase coined by Mayor William Hartsfield in 1959, Atlanta put business and economic interests ahead of racial divisions. That said, it was still a place where poor Black people had “their place” and they stayed in it. It has been argued though that the more prominent social divide was not between White people and Black people, it was between elite Black people and poor Black people. Maurice J. Hobson wrote that, “A divide between the [B]lack elite and the [B]lack poor had always riven Atlanta’s social fabric. Even after the government shifted from [W]hite to [B]lack hands, its leaders pursued policies that benefitted [W]hite and [B]lack elites to the exclusion of the vast majority of the [B]lack citizens who had brought them to power.”<sup>27</sup> This trend continued into the 1980s despite the public perception of Atlanta’s Black middle-class as *the* prime example of Black America.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’ Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Dudley Clendinen, “Atlanta, Mecca for Middle-Class Blacks, Also Harbors Poverty,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 1986, 16.

As a child, my mother's entire life revolved around her small corner of the world in Atlanta.

"So, I grew up in Summer Hill. That's where I was born. It was a neighborhood that was established in 1865 after the Civil War. It was for freed slaves and Jewish immigrants."<sup>29</sup> This was not uncommon as African Americans often



Figure 1: 1967 Rubennia at about age 7.

shared space with Jewish families and businesses in the South and Jewish people often allied themselves with African American people in the fight for social equality.<sup>30</sup> Established following the Civil War, the Summer Hill community was once a home to Black freedmen and freedwomen. It was one of Atlanta's first African American communities. Since its founding it has been home to both free Black people as well as Jewish immigrants but in her youth, my mother remembers the neighborhood being completely Black other than a single store that was run by a Jewish family.<sup>31</sup> She recalls that "As long as we [Black children] were in Summer Hill, we were in our bubble... other than the Jewish people that

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<sup>29</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> For more on this see: Raymond A. Mohl, "'South of the South?' Jews, Blacks, and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 2, (Winter, 1999), 3-36; Clive Webb, "Closing Ranks: Montgomery Jews and Civil Rights, 1954-1960," *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 3, part 1 (December 1998), 463-481.

<sup>31</sup> Mark K. Bauman, "Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: The German Jews from the Civil War Through the Progressive Era," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 534.

owned the grocery across the street.”<sup>32</sup> This statement reveals the insulation she felt in her small community. Being surrounded by other Black families provided a buffer from the racial and social upheaval happening in the world outside of Summer Hill.

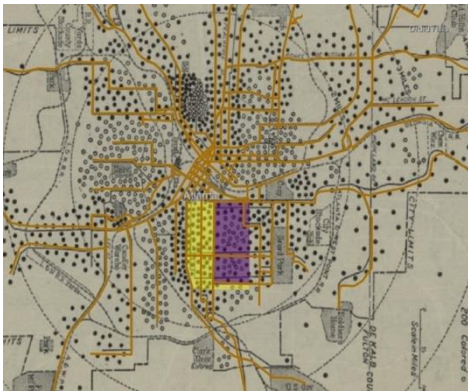


Figure 2: 1924 racial density map. The yellow section represents Southside, the White section, while the purple is the Black community of Summer Hill

In this Black enclave lived all her known relatives who occupied three parallel streets. Those streets were Atlanta Avenue, where my mother lived with her parents; Ormond Avenue, where her paternal grandparents lived; and South Avenue, where her maternal grandparents resided.

This tight knit community included all the essentials for life for the Willis family; their family, their church, their schools, Zoo Atlanta, and Atlanta Fulton County Stadium were all within a mile of where she lived. She recalls that, “Anything outside of [Summer Hill] we thought, ‘Oh my God, we’re going on this wonderful trip!’ It’s so strange to even think that way now.”<sup>33</sup> Traveling to places such as Decatur, Georgia, which is roughly six miles away from Summer Hill

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<sup>32</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

was like going out of town and to her young mind, Decatur was where the rich people lived.

By some available accounts, Summer Hill was a slum of Atlanta. Throughout the 1960s, problems persisted in this working-class neighborhood. Urban blight, unemployment, and overcrowded schools were just a few of the issues plaguing my mother's early childhood community. These conditions undoubtedly created an atmosphere of frustration and fomented feelings of neglect and discrimination for the adults living in Summer Hill.<sup>34</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to say that the area was indeed neglected by the city due to its large, almost exclusively poor African American population.<sup>35</sup> The east side of Summer Hill was designated the Black section while the area west and just south of Capitol Avenue (now Hank Aaron Drive) was controlled by White businesses and government officials. Capitol Avenue itself was the dividing line between the White and Black sections of these neighborhoods, with the area west of Capitol Avenue becoming known as the Southside.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For more on this see: Reese Cleghorn, "Allen of Atlanta Collides with Black Power and White Racism," *The New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 134; LeeAnn B. Lands, *Poor Atlanta: Poverty, Race, and the Limits of Sunbelt Development* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2023).

<sup>35</sup> LeeAnn B. Lands, *Poor Atlanta: Poverty, Race, and the Limits of Sunbelt Development* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2023), 95-119.

<sup>36</sup> Sean Richard Keenan, "GSU Researcher Takes Deep Dive into Summerhill's Fascinating, Turbulent History," *Curbed Atlanta*, June 27, 2019,

By both modern and contemporary standards, the Willis family would have been relatively low on the socioeconomic scale, but the children of that



Figure 3: Circa 1965, Sisters Rubennia, Felecia, and Yashlyn.

household never perceived themselves as poor. “When we were growing up, we did not consider ourselves as poor because everybody in the neighborhood was on the same level. Either you were

domestic servants, or you worked in a hotel. My grandfather probably was considered on the more upscale of the income because he worked at the railroad.” The interconnectedness of their family and community at that time played a significant role in coloring her childhood perspective on the family’s economic dynamics. The survival networks forged by the adults in her life provided a degree of socioeconomic stability that was felt by every member of the family. This is evidenced by the presence of multiple generations of her family living under one roof during the urban housing crisis in Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>37</sup> The use of survival networks in Black communities helped

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<https://atlanta.curbed.com/2019/6/27/18761209/gsu-historian-deep-dive-georgia-avenue-summerhill>.

<sup>37</sup> Lands, 154-176.

members to bypass the bureaucratic and often costly and time-consuming policies and procedures of larger organizations.

You didn't really have a need for a lot of daycares, back then because you had grandmothers. You know, *real* grandmothers that were watching kids. And what I mean is that the age difference between the children and the grandchildren [...] was "traditional" shall we say? So, growing up in my household, my grandmother was already old to me. My paternal grandmother was definitely hurting. [...] There was a lot of sharing of households back in that day, but it wasn't anything unusual.<sup>38</sup>

Per John Field in *Social Capital*, "By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either, could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty."<sup>39</sup>

Coming into her mid-teenaged years, my mother experienced a drastic shift in her home life. In 1974, her mother, Mary Louise, remarried after divorcing her abusive first husband, Harold.

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<sup>38</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, May 11, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> John Field, *Social Capital* (London: Routledge, 2003) pp. 1.

My mother got married, when she married Frank [Gibson], I decided I just could not live in that house with them. He made it so hard for me as a teenager. I always did what I supposed to do. Even if I did what I was supposed to do, it wasn't good enough. And he would just say little snarky things to me... It could have been the fact that I refused to call him daddy. I don't know what it was, but when we moved in that house on Decatur, it just amplified the way he treated me, and I knew that my mother was not going to let me get married. She was not going to let me leave that house unless I was married. And she wasn't going to let me get married if I wasn't pregnant. So, I got pregnant.<sup>40</sup>

This was with my mother's first husband, Robert Storey. Even as a teenager, my mother was very strategic in her actions. Utilizing a notable degree of conscious bodily autonomy, she took her life into her own hands. My mother was able to use her sex, which in her youth would have been considered a disadvantage, to exert power and control in her own life. She had planned her escape from an unhappy home life but what was even more remarkable was the consideration she put into the man and family she would marry into at a very young age.

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<sup>40</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022.

He had a very solid foundation growing up. There were a lot of them. They didn't have very much money... their mother didn't work. The dad worked at Grady [Memorial] Hospital in the emergency room as an attendant. He did that for years until he finally retired. [He] Couldn't read a lick... His wife did most of the management of the household. He trusted her beyond measure, and they were a good couple, country folk.... A lot of times, it was rough raising their children because they didn't have much. He had a good job but even if you've got a good job, if you've got a lot of children, you know?... They were amazing people. And that's what drew me to them. That's what drew me to him [Robert], because it just seemed like they had a strong family circle.<sup>41</sup>

Strong family ties had been essential to the way my mother grew up. Even if she sought distance from the new, distressing family dynamic, she innately understood that she would need to have a solid familial base to rely on and chose her first mate accordingly. It is also very telling that the matriarch of the family she was marrying into, though she did not work, was the manager of the

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<sup>41</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022.

household. This was another female role model that exhibited strength and fortitude and reliability for my mother to model herself after.

## Social Capital and Survival Networks

Robert Putnam discusses the term “social capital” in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.<sup>42</sup> Social capital, simply stated, can be understood as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular setting that allow them to live and work together efficiently. Per Barry F. Malone, social capital has also been described by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as, “... a group’s ability to utilize past associations, to network, and marshal economic resources while working toward a common goal.”<sup>43</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, collective civic actions were at an all-time high for marginalized groups in the United States. These social movements connected local people’s actions to national events, making them feel part of something bigger.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Barry F. Malone, “Before *Brown*: Cultural and Social Capital in a Rural Black School Community, W.E.B. DuBois High School, Wake Forest, North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 85, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 416.

<sup>44</sup> For more on this see: Martha Norkunas, “Women’s Narratives of Racialized and Gendered Space in Austin, Texas,” *Ethnological Forum/ Etnoloska Tribina* 46, no. 39 (2016): 139-156.

In the context of my mother's life and the lives of many African American people of her time, social capital can also be akin to *quid pro quo* but of a much more personal and crucial nature which is why I prefer the terms "survival networks" or "networks of survival." Writing about survival and social welfare in the age of Jim Crow, Tera Hunter relates that,

The hardening of segregation in the South led [B]lack women to redouble their coping efforts... the development of private institutions became especially important to substitute for the public services that were denied to [B]lacks by the [W]hite establishment. This institution building coincided not only with the development of segregation, but also with the Progressive reform movement that was sweeping the nation.<sup>45</sup>

In Atlanta, formal community organizing for African American neighborhoods began as early as 1908. The Neighborhood Union of Atlanta, Georgia was established by African American women who sought to improve the social conditions of the city, especially Black neighborhoods.<sup>46</sup> The Atlanta Urban League was founded in 1920 as a member of the National Urban League.

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<sup>45</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 130.

<sup>46</sup> Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 500.

The National Urban League and its affiliates sought to improve the lives and economic prospects for African American people across the United States.

Around 1968, in another slum neighborhood of Atlanta—Vine City, the African American residents banded together to improve their neighborhood. Vine City was another area of Atlanta that received very few social services and started their very own organization, The Vine City Foundation, to alleviate some of the problems and barriers plaguing the community and its residents.<sup>47</sup>

Mutual aid societies, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Greek letter organizations, and community churches have long operated in Black communities as vehicles of social uplift. As cited by Charles Williams, Jr. and Hilda J.B. Williams, anthropologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton once argued, “that the system of segregation denied African Americans opportunities for self-expression, achievement, and self-fulfillment within the context of the larger society. Therefore, African Americans resorted to self-reliance and developed a variety of mutual aid efforts through their voluntary associations.”<sup>48</sup> Voluntary associations, including the Black church, were and continue to be particularly important to Black women.

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<sup>47</sup> Lerner, 512.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Williams, Jr., and Hilda J.B. Williams, “Mutual Aid Societies and Economic Development: Survival Efforts,” in *African Americans in the South: Issues of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Hans A. Baer and Yvonne Jones (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 27.

## The Black Church and Women's Work

The Black Church has long been a unifying and fortifying institution for Black communities. As W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "a study of economic cooperation among Negroes must begin with the church groups."<sup>49</sup> While the term "the Black Church" suggests a monolithic religious institution or religious experience, nothing could be further from the truth. The African American Christian experience has always been diverse and decentralized. There are only seven historically recognized denominations that make up the Black Church and they are: the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Progressive National Convention, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Church of God in Christ. For a church to be considered a part of the Black Church, they must be a member of one of the previously listed conventions and Black people must hold the reins of power economically and ideologically. In other words, Black people must control the money and the message within the churches associated with these denominations.<sup>50</sup> This is a crucial distinction to make in any understanding of

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) pp. 40.

<sup>50</sup> Aaron Treadwell, lecture at Middle Tennessee State University, Fall 2021.

social capital and survival networks in Black communities in order to dispel the myths surrounding the view that African Americans have been dependent on the benevolence and charity of White Americans for socioeconomic survival. The Black Church itself developed from mutual aid efforts decades before the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 4: 1942, Mount Carmel Baptist Church. Present in this picture is Rubennia's Great Aunt, Ada Naomi Lynch.

In *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that “With a language all its own, symbols all its own, the Black Church offered a reprieve from the racist world, a place for African Americans to come

together in community to advance their aspirations.”<sup>52</sup> It does not matter whether those aspirations are freedom from bondage, equal rights, or surviving day-by-day, the Black Church has been a pillar of support for Black communities and individuals across the United States. In this sense, the Black Church is in fact

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<sup>51</sup> Williams and Williams, 27-29.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021)

a formal organization that affords social capital to members of the community, and it is also crucial to individuals' survival networks. For my mother, the church she grew up in, Mount Carmel Baptist Church, was indeed a part of the Black Church. She recalls spending the entire day at church on Sundays, from Sunday school in the early morning to church service in the mid-morning to dinner and fellowship during the late afternoon. They even had choir rehearsals during the week. Church was how they "stayed connected to [their] people" even after the family was forced to move away from Summer Hill. The church was at once the nucleus, a refuge, and a requirement for the women and children in their family.

Church for Black women was especially important. Church and community work were ways in which African American women could stretch the oppressive bounds of patriarchy and racism. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes wrote, "In every organization where they [Black women] are present, they have been the key actors responsible for the integrity and efficacy of the operations."<sup>53</sup> As my mother remembers, the church mothers, or the motherboard, held an esteemed position within the church and community of her youth.

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<sup>53</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For The Women...* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 2001) pp. 8.

[They were] supposed to be leaders. The motherboard was supposed to guide the younger women of the church. They didn't have any administrative powers like the Deacons did, but they were respected women in the Church. So, if the respected women in the Church came and approached you about something, then you were supposed to correct whatever they came to approach you about. So, they're the mamas of the Church.<sup>54</sup>

Though at the time they were not perceived to be *the* leaders, “they nevertheless formulated strategies and tactics to mobilize community resources for their collective actions.”<sup>55</sup> Some were designated church mothers because they were married to a deacon, but others, like her grandmother, reached that status by being exemplars of Black, Christian womanhood. They were considered “above reproach.”<sup>56</sup> These women were the moral guides for younger women in the church and the community at large.

Along with their protégé, the motherboard was often an important money generator for the church. After 1906, Black congregations began recognizing

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<sup>54</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

Women's Day, a day on which women take over the programs and present their respective organizations with funds they have raised.<sup>57</sup> According to Gilkes,

Strong Women's Departments retained control over the disbursement and allocation of their funds. Women paid the expenses of their leaders and staff members, collected offerings for the evangelists and church mothers "teaching" in the churches and representing districts and congregations at national meetings, and provided benevolence for unemployed men, women, and their families.<sup>58</sup>

Despite their central role within male dominated churches, in the past Black women were largely ignored in scholarship on the Black church and community; however, church and community aid groups allowed Black women to exercise collective power at a time when they had little social power individually.<sup>59</sup> The women in these institutions often flexed this collective power to help uplift the community as a whole and individuals as needed. This makes African American women vital to the networks of survival in Black communities.

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<sup>57</sup> Gilkes, 53.

<sup>58</sup> Gilkes, 53.

<sup>59</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.

These Black church women have contributed their efforts toward community development and maintenance, often without the rewards afforded to men who have done the same. Despite the lack of acknowledgement, they continued in their determination to “uplift the race” through different community-based interventions.<sup>60</sup>

Though church work was an important vehicle for social power for Black women, it is critical to note that they also exerted some degree of economic influence through their wage work outside the home and charitable giving from their own incomes.<sup>61</sup> Their church and community work exemplify that Black women are not simply the beneficiaries of collective actions they are also the benefactors. This also holds true when discussing African American women’s roles in mutual aid societies.

### Organized and Unorganized Mutual Aid

Long before there was a formally acknowledged Black Church, there were mutual aid societies, also known as Benevolent Societies. These voluntary associations filled the gaps where churches and other forms of formal communal

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<sup>60</sup> Edwards, 90.

<sup>61</sup> For more on this see: Jaqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

organization fell short. A single church could not fulfill all the needs of its congregants and the surrounding community so mutual aid groups arose to stand in the gaps. Early mutual aid organizations were generally a type of group insurance where each member contributes to a fund that would payout in the event of an illness, death, unemployment, old age, etc.<sup>62</sup>

During my mother's life, organized mutual assistance groups had evolved



Figure 5 circa 2000, Mary Louise Gibson wearing a SCLC W.O.M.E.N t-shirt.

from their antebellum roots. These bodies took on a more political role in their struggle for social and racial uplift. We saw this with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and

1970s.

Churches and clergymen were the vanguard in the fight for racial justice and equality, but mutual assistance groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to name a few, also played a huge part in that fight. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was another more traditional type of mutual aid group with their

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<sup>62</sup> Robert L. Harris, Jr., "Early Black Benevolent Societies 1780-1830," *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1979), 614.

Free Breakfast for Children program, a program that was instrumental to the permanent establishment in 1975 of a federal free School Breakfast Program.<sup>63</sup>

Black women played a pivotal role in these organizations and sometimes created auxiliary groups of their own. Remembering her mother's activism she said, "My mother [Mary Louise] worked with Evelyn Lowery with the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] trying to get people registered to vote. She knew how important voting was for Black folks at the time."<sup>64</sup> Evelyn Gibson Lowery, was a prominent civil rights and women's rights advocate that worked alongside her husband, the Reverend Joseph E. Lowery, in the fight for racial uplift. Her concern for the welfare of women and girls led her to establish SCLC's sister organization, SCLC Women's Organizational Movement for Equality Now Inc. (SCLC W.O.M.E.N. Inc.).<sup>65</sup>

"She [Mary Louise] did voter registration even before she became involved with the SCLC W.O.M.E.N."<sup>66</sup> By her mother's example, she learned the importance of contributing to the community both through church work as well

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<sup>63</sup> For more on this see: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change>.

<sup>64</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre' Anna Stewart, February 6, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> "Fulton County Library Dedicated to Clark College Alumna and Civil Rights Activist Evelyn Gibson Lowery." *US Official News*, July 10, 2019. *Gale OneFile: News* (accessed February 11, 2023). [https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/apps/doc/A592935933/STND?u=tel\\_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=a7e15db8](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/apps/doc/A592935933/STND?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=a7e15db8).

<sup>66</sup> Rubennia Woods, Interview with Tre' Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

as through club participation. Whether they understood this or not, both women were continuing a tradition of participation in survival networks that have helped the larger Black community thrive. From contributing financially or working for national organizations for local causes to contributing to the benevolence funds at churches, African American people have used their survival networks to achieve both long-term and short-term as well as personal and communal goals. From the political activities of racial uplift organizations to multigenerational households, these modes of survival were and continue to be essential to the everyday lives of Black people as well as to the future of their descendants. It cannot be overstated that Black women were very often the backbone of these efforts despite having the social limitations of being both Black and female.

Mutual aid can also be a disorganized effort that can be mutually beneficial between individuals. This includes activities such as trading goods for services and other in-kind arrangements. An example of this from my mother's life comes from her connection to her first husband's family. Bypassing corporate and governmental structures for childcare, my mother looked to her new family to support her work outside of the home.

TS: What about childcare? Who was doing most of the work with the children at home?

RW: I was at home with the children and when I went to work, his [Robert's] sister watched them. She did a lot of watching of my oldest, while he and I was together. My oldest never went to daycare. She always was with her aunt who didn't work. That's what she did. She kept kids.<sup>67</sup>

Strong Black Womanhood often means relying on yourself but through strong networks of survival and voluntary associations, Black women have been able to share their burdens amongst one another while simultaneously easing the next Black woman's challenges.

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<sup>67</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022.

## Part II: The Rose That Grew from Concrete: Trauma, Survival, and Survivance

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—“He had a lot of demons.”

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My mother is the strongest person I know. These words and the sentiment behind them probably resonate with women and men all over the world but as is often the case, they take on a very different meaning for lower class minorities. In the case of my mother—and women from similar backgrounds—that strength was bred in her from childhood. In her own words, she grew up with a father who, “had a lot of demons,” brought on by traumas endured in his own childhood at the hands of his parents. Those demons would be the foundation on which her lifetime of strength was built. One could argue that many, if not most, African American children born post-Emancipation grew up side-by-side with their own strength-inducing demons often acting through their parents.

When scholars write about the legacies of slavery, there is usually quite a bit about institutionalized racism, economic inequality, and any number of scholarly acknowledged repercussions of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> For more see: Leslie M. Harris, James T. Campbell, and Alfred L. Brophy, *Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019); *The Atlantic Slave*

There is, however, one legacy of slavery that remains pervasive in Black families and that is rigid obedience training for children which, more often than not involved the use of, or threat of, physical violence. Corporal punishment along with strict obedience training have long been considered necessary in raising well-behaved children which has always been especially important for Black children in the United States. Speaking very generally, the United States is a country in which Black children are denied the benefit of being children.<sup>69</sup> They must grow up quickly and learn “their place” in the world and theirs is a place that is always just on the edge of peril.<sup>70</sup> This was particularly true under the slave system in the United States. Taking cues from their enslavers, enslaved parents often engaged in the practice of rigid obedience training as a means of protecting their children from the master’s lash.<sup>71</sup> Post-Emancipation, it was still

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*Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, eds. Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

<sup>69</sup> For more on this see: Darlene Powell Hopson and Derek S. Hopson, *Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991); Crystal Lynn Webster, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); James P. Comer and Alvin F. Poussaint, *Raising Black Children: Two Leading Psychiatrists Confront the Educational, Social, and Emotional Problems Facing Black Children* (New York: Plume, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> For more see: Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> For more on violence and the enslaved see: Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andrew Fede, *Homicide Justified: The Legality of Killing Slaves in the United States and the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

of vital importance that African American children understood the multitude of boundaries that existed for them which, post-Jim Crow, is still the case for African American people. Dr. Stacy Patton wrote that, “Black parents have legitimate fears about the safety of their children, and the overwhelming majority believe physical discipline is necessary to keep [B]lack children out of the streets, out of prison, or out of police officers’ sight.”<sup>72</sup> With that said, it is important to recognize that rigid obedience training does not always have to be enforced through physical violence. There are other strategies that parents can employ to yield similar, if not the same, result: a child hyperaware of their behavior and the possible repercussions if they act outside of the boundaries drilled into them. Another important caveat to consider and take note of is the varied outcomes for children raised under such strict discipline.<sup>73</sup>

Physical violence as discipline is a lesson that was learned through the harsh realities of slavery and was reinforced due to post-Emancipation racism.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Stacey Patton, “Corporal punishment in black communities: Not an intrinsic cultural tradition but racial trauma,” *CYF News*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2017/04/racial-trauma>.

<sup>73</sup> For more see: Reginald Leamon Robinson, “Dark Secrets: Obedience Training, Rigid Physical Violence, Black Parenting, and Reassessing the Origins of Instability in the Black Family Through a Re-Reading of Fox Butterfield’s *All God’s Children*,” *Howard Law Journal*, 55 no. 2 (Winter 2012), 393-454.

<sup>74</sup> For more on post-Emancipation violence see: William A. Link, *Atlanta, Cradle of the New South: Race and Remembering in the Civil War’s Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

These legacies continue to be passed down from generation to generation and have been described by Dr. Joy DeGruy as multigenerational maladaptive behaviors. She theorizes that Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome is responsible for various adaptive behaviors observed in African American communities after generations of oppression, violence, and chattel slavery.<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that African American people are more prone to violence, but the theory suggests that they have been conditioned to believe that strict obedience training through violence is at once a necessary survival tactic and also an act of love and protection. Multigenerational maladaptive behaviors are not to be confused with Marianne Hirsch's theory of intergenerational post-memory. While both theories are at work in the lives of African Americans, they are very distinct from one another.

### Extending the Master's Lash

As was the case for most Black children during her youth, my mother was both subject and witness to homeplace violence. Her father, Harold Willis, was a mechanic and a Marine Corp. veteran but he was also an alcoholic. As his favored child, my mother was rarely the target of his alcohol induced rampages,

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<sup>75</sup> Joy DeGruy, "Post-Slavery Syndrome: A Multigenerational Look at African American Injury, Healing, and Resilience," In *Mass Trauma and Emotional Healing Around the World: Rituals and Practices for Meaning-Making, Vol. 2: Human-Made Disasters*, edited by Ani Kalayjian and Dominique Eugene (Santa Barbara: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2010), 227-250.

but she was not exempt from physical discipline when he thought the occasion called for it. The harsher violence, it seems, was reserved for her mother and elder siblings. “My older siblings, they talk a lot about how, when he punished them, his punishments were severe. I never got any of that. I did witness it with



*Figure 6: circa 1980, Rubennia with her mother and six siblings*

him and my mother. I witnessed that, but he never whipped me like that.”<sup>76</sup>

To explain and rationalize her father’s maladaptive behaviors, she looks to the past both before he was born and the context under which he lived. Not only did he learn from his own parents that extending the master’s lash was necessary for raising well-behaved children and thereby keeping them safe, but he was also raising his own family as a Black man during the 1950s and 1960s. These decades were marked by the African American struggle for social, political, and economic

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<sup>76</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre’Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

justice and equality. It was a time in which African American men struggled to retain their sense of “manhood” in the face of white supremacy and oppression.<sup>77</sup>

In the American South, violence was a racist means of social control. In many cases, African American men could not guarantee the safety of their own physical bodies let alone those of their wives, children, and families. In addition to that, according to sociologist Michael Kimmel, “Violence has long been understood as the best way to ensure that others publicly recognize one’s manhood.”<sup>78</sup> This fact, compounded by the daily oppression and emasculation of African American men, resulted in a man haunted by “demons.” Harold Willis sought his solace at the bottom of a bottle and reasserted his manhood in the home by physically abusing his wife and children. Furthermore,

Violence also reflected an important aspect of southern male identity. Antebellum notions of honour and chivalry created an idea of masculinity that subsequent generations learned, used and reinforced, primarily through the use of force. White men felt pressured to prove their manhood, and the [skillful] use of firearms and the willingness to defend one’s honour frequently served this

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<sup>77</sup> For more on this see: Simon Wendt, “They Finally Found Out that We Really Are Men’: Violence, Non-violence, and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era,” *Gender & History* 19, no. 3, November 2007.

<sup>78</sup>Wendt, 544.

end [...] The gendered nature of southern violence carried special significance for black men, who learned that violence, race, and gender were inextricably linked.<sup>79</sup>

Henry J. Raymond, Fred Jones, and Vanessa Cooke have made arguments to the contrary in their article entitled, "African American Scholars and Parents Cannot Blame Current Harsh Physical Punishment of Black Males on Slavery: A Response to 'Cultural Interpretations of Child Discipline: Voices of African American Scholars.'" As the title suggests, the authors deny the links between slavery and the need to physically punish African American children, particularly young males. Raymond et al. argue that, "Claims that African American parents must hit, spank, or beat their children for the purpose of preparing them for America's racist society are unsubstantiated by research findings."<sup>80</sup> While their data may show that the effects of physical punishment result in detrimental outcomes for young Black children, they themselves assert that, "Violence as a way of behaving is a learned behavior."<sup>81</sup> The resultant negative outcomes related to physical violence against children does not erase

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<sup>79</sup> Wendt, 545.

<sup>80</sup> Henry J. Raymond, Fred Jones, and Vanessa Cooke, "African American Scholars and Parents Cannot Blame Current Harsh Physical Punishment of Black Males on Slavery: A Response to 'Cultural Interpretations of Child Discipline: Voices of African American Scholars.'" *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 6, no. 4 (1998), 279.

<sup>81</sup> Raymond, et al., 283.

the historical connection of the pervasiveness of the practice in Black families to slavery. The argument here is not that corporeal punishment is necessary, rather that the *perceived* necessity of it in the Black community is rooted in historical trauma, fear, and learned violence. In her research, Krystal Bowen argued that “childhood exposure to violence in the home and the influence of racial minority stress gravely impedes the emotional and psychological functioning of [Black males] ... therefore, perpetuating the cycle of family violence.”<sup>82</sup>

With her own children, my mother also employed the master’s lash in her disciplining methods. She was raised in such a way that physical discipline was not only the norm but the best way to raise respectable and well-behaved children. The same holds true about her second husband, Todd Woods.

TS: Well, what did discipline look like in your household...as the parent?

[...]

RW: I don't remember whipping my children. I remember fussing a lot. Screaming a lot. But I don't remember whipping.

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<sup>82</sup> Krystal Bowen, “Boys to Men: A Guide to Understanding African American Men, Their Trauma, and Preservation of Violence in Families.” *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, (ProQuest Information & Learning, 2019), <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2018-52506-115&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

RW: Unless I got selective memory.

TS: You definitely have selective memory.

RW: I [don't] remember whipping [any]body.

TS: We definitely preferred dad's whippings over yours.

RW: *Really?!*

TS: Yes. Because you whooped harder and longer. Dad, he'd hit you a couple of times but then he'd start feeling bad and then he'd apologize.

RW: *Really?!*

TS: Yes. He was like, "It hurt me more than it hurt you." That's what he used to say... But no, we were like, "Nope. We'd rather get Daddy's whooping than Mama's whooping!"... But I think you stopped whooping us before he did, so. Yeah, Mama didn't have that. She was like, "Your tears don't affect me." (laughs)

RW: [No.] ... I don't want to see no tears. Shouldn't have been doing what you did.

Apparently taking a note from her father's book, she admits that at least one time, "... I whooped her [Shannotavia] and Teasha [Tenecia]. I didn't really

whoop them. I beat them. It was a beating.”<sup>83</sup> Normalized violence against children in African American families has a long history that is perpetuated each time it is used on a subsequent generation. That said, contextual factors such as poverty contribute to family stress (e.g., economic stress on parents that in turn puts stress on the child/children) and increase the likelihood that physical discipline and abuse will occur which in turn will have an impact on child development.<sup>84</sup> For children in a Black, low-income household, the Willis children were no strangers to violence.



Figure 7: 1962, pictured here are Rubennia's parents, Harold and Mary Louise Willis.

Favored as my mother was as a child, bearing witness to violence can be just as traumatic as being the victim of violence, particularly when it is perpetrated against someone that you love by another loved one. One memory that stands out is the night that her father nearly killed her mother.

I [will] never forget it because they had just came back from playing pinochle with their best friends. And obviously they lost

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<sup>83</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre' Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022.

<sup>84</sup> T'Pring R. Westbrook, Brenda Jones Harden, Allison K. Holmes, Allison D. Meisch, and Jessica Vick Whittaker, "Physical Discipline Use and Child Behavior Problems in Low-Income, High-Risk African American Families," *Early Education and Development* 24, no. 6 (August 1, 2013): 925.

the game. I remember distinctly [it was] like a dollar [and] eighty cents that they lost. So, mother told them, "Well, I don't have any money. I have to write you a check." And when he got home, he was just so upset because he was embarrassed by it. So that started a fight. She ended up going to the hospital. Her neck was swollen to the point where she couldn't speak. I guess where he had been choking her.<sup>85</sup>

This example illustrates Harold's need to reassert his manhood at home following a perceived public threat to his masculinity. While she does not claim to be a survivor of childhood trauma, one can hardly describe her as anything other than that. Her mother's assault was compounded that very night by another traumatizing occurrence.

RW: Also, at the time that's when my uncle shot him. So, he ended up in the hospital, too...

TS: He shot him while in process of harming your mom?

[...]

RW: Yeah. This was all during the same time. He came over there, and I don't even know how he got there. I don't even know how

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<sup>85</sup> Rubennia Woods, interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 18, 2022.

my uncle knew, you know, but yeah, he came over there and he ended up shooting him with a .22.

Per Alessandro Albizzati, Cristina Riva Crugnola, and Elena Ierardi, children exposed to domestic violence have a higher risk of having delays in cognitive, psychic, emotional and physical development with school and social interaction difficulties, internalizing and externalizing problems, learning disorders, aggressive behavior and post-traumatic symptoms.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the 2001 dissertation written by Hasse A. Leonard, found that, “children who witness severe domestic violence have trouble with reality testing and view the world as a dangerous place and suffer from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder].”<sup>87</sup>

Without having a psychological evaluation, we cannot label her with any type of disorder, and this work does not seek to paint that picture, the goal rather, is to illustrate the likelihood of not only my mother but other women from similar backgrounds are living silently with the effects of childhood family violence. Through her reluctance to claim her own trauma, we begin to get at the core of the problem with the stereotype of the strong Black woman and the

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<sup>86</sup> Alessandro Albizzati, Cristina R. Crugnola, and Elena Ierardi, “Witnessing domestic violence: Effects on child development and clinical implication for paediatricians,” *Medico e Bambino* 40, no. 1, January 2021, 25-30.

<sup>87</sup> Hasse A. Leonard, “The Traumatic Effects of Witnessing Domestic Violence on Children’s Emotional Functioning,” PhD, diss., The California School of Professional Psychology, 2001, 81.

internalization of said stereotype. In my mother's mind, trauma is intrinsically connected to victimhood and thereby weakness and so she rejects the very notion of her own trauma. My mother represents an entire generation of young girls who grew into women and had to live beyond their trauma within a community that frowned upon seeking mental health treatment.

As a well-defined example of the strong Black woman archetype, my mother has been conditioned to turn away from labels such as victim, traumatized, helpless, etc. When asked about the significant periods she has lived through and if any of those moments met her criteria of "traumatic," she answered, "No, I don't think so. It's just a part of life. There are people who have suffered trauma in their lives that are still living with it, no matter how old they are... some people like being victims. There are some people who rise above that and there are some people that can't deal with it."<sup>88</sup> When asked about trauma and victimhood, she replied, "I think [people] chose to remain in negative situations or negative mindsets. You've got to move beyond it. Just don't make the same mistakes."<sup>89</sup> This tendency to push on despite adversity, despite trauma, is one of those traits that have been passed down from generation to generation.

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<sup>88</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, February 18, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

## Survival as Resistance: An Examination of Black Womanhood

As previously discussed, survival networks were and still are an important part of the Black community. Black women were key actors within those networks providing homecooked meals, organizing strong women's departments at churches, supporting voter registration efforts, and opening homes to extended family. While these works were intrinsic to the expectations of strong Black women, internally, Black women existed in a vacuum. Per Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "Being strong' obliges Black women to exhibit a ready endurance to a life constructed against the backdrop of obstacles, unfairness, and, tellingly, a lack of assistance from others."<sup>90</sup> In my mother's life, a lesson passed down from her foremothers was that,

You don't let people know what's going on... Living with the mother, grandmother, great-grandmother we had, you didn't share your [personal] problems. It's not like I can go to mama and say, "Hey, I can't feed my children. I need some help feeding my babies."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>91</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant also relates that, “Black women are largely introduced to the discourse of strength through the example and directives of mothers. Such women are typically held in high regard for managing multiple life challenges with grace and wells of love for others in their care.”<sup>92</sup> The internal lives of Black women have always been policed and censored by the expectations of both other Black women and society at large.<sup>93</sup>

One of the things that [my mother] did tell us was that even if you just have a dime in your pocket, the world don't have to know it. You walk with your head high like you got a million bucks. And that has always stayed with me no matter what I'm going through... There was one time that I broke down, and I think about it all the time, when I allowed the world to see what I was going through. It was payday. I only had enough money to make it to drop my kids off at daycare. I did not have any money to get from the daycare to work. That was back in the days when they

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<sup>92</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 75.

<sup>93</sup> For more on this see: Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E. Marwick, and Danah Boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23, no. 3 (May 2018): 163-179; Jane E. Dabel and Mary E. Booth, “Reputable and Entitled to Credit: The Respectability of African American Women in Nineteenth-Century New York City,” *New York History* 100, no. 2 (2019): 192-208; Jane Paisley Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 212-220.

were giving checks. There wasn't no direct deposit where you can go to the ATM and all this other stuff. I called one of my coworkers and when she came and picked me up, I just broke down crying which is something we were always taught not to do. You don't let the world know things are that rough that you just fall apart.<sup>94</sup>

Another real-life example occurred after an instance of domestic violence in my mother's own marriage, she recalls that, "I never explained to her [Mary



Figure 8: 1984, Rubennia and Todd at Piedmont Park in Atlanta, GA

Louise] exactly what was going on because I didn't need anybody judging me."<sup>95</sup> At the time of this abuse, my mother was experiencing the added distress that comes with being married to a crack addict. Sometime during the

late 1980s, my mother's second husband—my father—became addicted to crack-cocaine.<sup>96</sup> Both my mother and father are products of the 1960s and 1970s,

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<sup>94</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, January 31, 2022

<sup>95</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, February 18, 2022.

<sup>96</sup> For more on the crack-cocaine epidemic see: Adrianna Finamore, "Geeking and Freaking: Black Women and the 1980s Crack Epidemic," *California History* 99, (2022): 59-80; Kathleen M. Roe and Meredith Minkler, "The Assumption of Caregiving: Grandmothers Raising the Children of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic," *Qualitative Health Research* 4, no. 3 (August 1994):

an era when smoking marijuana and maybe experimenting with “a little uppers” were just “things teenagers did.”<sup>97</sup> According to my mother, the drugs that people experimented with then did not have the destructive and addictive power that crack-cocaine had in the 1980’s. While not her first exposure to the drug crack-cocaine, it was the story of Len Bias that prompted both of my parents to swear never to touch that drug.

Leonard K. Bias, a promising young Black athlete, had just been chosen as the number two National Basketball Association (NBA) draft pick by the championship winning Boston Celtics. Shortly after, news spread across the country that he had died of cardiac arrest. To celebrate his achievement, Len had gone out and tried crack-cocaine. There was no evidence to suggest that Len had used the drug before the night that he died, but according to Maryland’s chief medical examiner at the time, Dr. John Smialek, Len died of “‘cocaine intoxication’ that interrupted his heartbeat and caused cardiac arrest.”<sup>98</sup>

Watching this news story was an alarming moment for my parents and they swore to one another to never touch a drug so potent that it could kill you after a single use.

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281-303; Meredith Minkler, *Grandmothers As Caregivers: Raising Children of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1993).

<sup>97</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

<sup>98</sup> “Len Bias died of ‘cocaine intoxication’,” *Ukiah Daily Journal*, June 25, 1986, 11.

My mother is unsure when my father first began using crack-cocaine, however, she admits that the signs were there, but she misinterpreted them as a possible gambling addiction.

I was still in that thought that we wouldn't ever try it because we knew how dangerous it was... So, I thought he was gambling. I thought he had a gambling habit. My little crazy self, [I] went to Gamblers Anonymous and got the numbers and tried to talk to his bosses and told them, "He has a gambling problem," and as I think back, sometime later, people were [probably] looking at me like, "No." Gambling does not keep you from coming to work. It does not change the person who you are. It does not turn you into a whole other personality. I guess, early 1988 is when it finally hit me that this was what was going on and I think it's when the job finally just turned him loose.<sup>99</sup>

For the next several years, my mother was caught in a cycle of trying to be a caregiver to four children and a crack addicted husband. Much of this time was spent dealing with her troubles and financial hardships alone. She did not tell those around her of her problems because, "that's just not what you do."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

TS: Can you describe the specific ways his addiction impacted your household and your children?

RW: Well, mood swings. He had terrible mood swings. You never know when he's going to go off. I mean, just mad. just mad at the world. You never know, you're always on edge because even if they did work a full week and they brought the check home, you don't even know if you're going to be allowed to keep that... I got to the point where I would start having somebody come by and pick it up just to get it out of the house.

[...]

That crack epidemic was—it was just something I wouldn't even want my worst enemy to live through.<sup>101</sup>

Exhibiting the fortitude of her ancestors and breaking with the code of silence her mother instilled in her, my mother finally reached out for help in dealing with her crack addicted spouse, which took a different kind of strength for her.

I went to Al-Anon probably about a year [after] and it just shifted my focus [from] him to my children and my household. [To] what I

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<sup>101</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

needed to do to take care of them because if I decide I don't want to be in this life anymore because it's just too much, then who's going to take care of my children? That's a big motivator. Take care of [them], my mama? Oh, heck no. It's got to be me. So, I had to take care of me, and it taught you how to do that. How to let go of whatever they're doing and focus on yourself. So, that's what basically saved me and allowed me to stay a little bit longer. Because as long as you're fighting with them and their addiction, they're going to stay in their addiction anyway. You can't make them stop. They've got to want it, themselves.<sup>102</sup>

My father did eventually go to rehabilitation and free himself from the crack habit but that did not mean things became any easier for my mother.

TS: What was your marriage like after he got clean?

RW: Oh, it was rough. It was rough because you never know what's going to trigger them to go back out there.



Figure 9: 1995, Rubennia, Todd, Shannontavia, Tiffany and Tre'Anna

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<sup>102</sup> Rubennia Woods, January 31, 2022.

You go from having a steady income coming in, now all of a sudden, you've got one income and that's [...] why I managed the household finances. I could not see myself turning my check over to him.<sup>103</sup>

In her day-to-day life as an adult, my mother embodied the Strong Black Woman typecast as expected by not only her family but also other Black women. Exhibiting traits of a strong Black woman was considered a badge of honor, inclusion into an exclusive group that carries their burdens with the grace of a lady and the grit of a warrior.<sup>104</sup>

It was stressful. Trying to take care of my kids. Trying to go to work and put on a happy face. Trying to keep the lights on, the water on. Trying to feed everybody. Trying to put a smile on your face [like] everything was okay, but nobody was allowed to see that not everything was okay, because you hid that.

[...]

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<sup>103</sup> Rubennia Woods, January 31, 2022.

<sup>104</sup> For more on this see: Jasmine A. Abrams, Morgan Maxwell, Michell Pope, and Faye Z. Belgrave, "Carrying the World with the Grace of a Lady and the Grit of a Warrior: Deepening Our Understanding of the 'Strong Black Woman' Schema," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2014): 503-518.

It was real stressful because not only, I'm working all day and had to take care of children, and then have to deal with that. That is why Al-Anon was so instrumental in maintaining my sanity because then, no matter what was going on in life, I was able to again, not focus on what was going on with [him]. In the very early goings on, like I said, I was trying to fix him. I was trying to say, "Oh, no. This is not the person I met. I *know* this person. This person, if *anybody* can conquer this, *this* person can. I'm going to help them."<sup>105</sup>

Caring for her children and household while contending with a drug addicted spouse was by no means a simple feat and yet, my mother bore those responsibilities silently as the women who came before her would have expected. Beauboeuf-Lafontant states that, "Facing adversity amidst extensive caretaking responsibilities are common realities evident in the actions of the kin and friends whom Black women love and respect, and after whom they model themselves. As a result, to become a strong Black woman is to follow a well-worn and distinguished path of hard work, caring, faithfulness, and generosity..."<sup>106</sup> In this regard, my mother modeled her mother and grandmother. From this

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<sup>105</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 72.

understanding, one can connect the Strong Black Woman archetype to the previously illustrated concept of postmemory. Marianne Hirsh, as quoted by Arlene R. Keizer, notes that, "Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation."<sup>107</sup> African American women are expected to project the strength of their ancestors by single-handedly enduring traumas and hardship, invest in their own perceived invulnerability, and create their own mythos of strength to be passed on to their next generation. The claim here is not that postmemory and the strong Black woman archetype are one and the same but rather that the strong Black woman schema is the direct result of African American postmemory. It is a cause-and-effect relationship that is deeply embedded in African American culture. The perpetuation of the strong Black woman model has also been coded into the way that African American women parent their children. According to Linda A. Oshin and Stephanie Milan,

When asked about childrearing goals, Black mothers emphasize education, self-respect, and the hope that their daughters will be strong and self-reliant. In addition to teaching their daughters to be

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<sup>107</sup> Arlene R. Keizer, "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1650.

functioning citizens in American culture, they also must teach them how to deal with racism and sexism. Black female family members report that socializing girls to be strong, assertive, and independent is a form of protection for a life likely to be impacted by hardships. Black parents may also push their daughters to pursue education and employment so that they can provide for their families and communities because they expect racial discrimination will have a bigger impact on sons.<sup>108</sup>

The study by Oshin and Milan “... examined a cultural image associated with Black women, the SBW [strong Black woman], and provided quantitative evidence that attributes related to this image may be embedded in the parental beliefs of Black mothers. [Their] findings indicate that SBW-related traits may be deemed particularly important and have a more positive meaning for Black mothers of adolescent girls compared to White and Latina mothers.<sup>109</sup> The more positive outlook on these traits by Black mothers is due to their expectation that their daughters *will* experience and endure traumas and hardships that will require them to be self-reliant and assertive. These characteristics are expected to

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<sup>108</sup> Linda A. Oshin and Stephanie Milan, “My Strong Black Daughter: Racial/Ethnic Differences in the Attributes Mothers Value for Their Daughter,” *Cultural and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 25, no. 2 (2019): 180.

<sup>109</sup> Oshin and Milan, 186.

aid them in resisting the impact of racism and sexism. Oshin and Milan's study demonstrates that there exists a fundamental rift in the ways that Black women parent their daughters, and the ways that White and Latina women parent theirs. Attributes generally perceived as rebellious and aggressive by White and Latina mothers are commonly associated with leadership rather than aggressive behaviors by Black mothers who see self-reliance and independence as central to the adolescent developmental period.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Oshin and Milan, 181.

## Conclusion: Coming Out On the Other Side

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*"I always tried to do more... so that I would be seen as I'm going somewhere."*

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The strong Black woman archetype, African American postmemory, and Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome are frameworks that influence the lives of every African American woman. In fact, the strong Black woman schema is a direct result of African American postmemory. My mother's life and testimony give credence to the fact that being a strong Black woman is as much a badge of honor as it is a substantial psychological and sometimes physiological burden to bear. The strong Black woman as a concept is a pillar of strength and inspiration to outsiders but to the individual Black woman it is at once traumatizing and a response to trauma.

As evidenced by her interviews, my mother was indoctrinated into the cult of the strong Black woman throughout her life. Growing up in the "Black Mecca" of Atlanta, Georgia, she was surrounded and influenced by other strong Black women. Through connections at home, in the community, and through the Black church, other Black women have modeled to her what it means to be Black, woman, and above reproach. The Black church in particular can be seen as the training ground for strong Black women. As has been demonstrated, Black women in the Black church are the foundation on which many churches stand yet they received little to no

acknowledgement or authority for many years. Though she grew up in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, survival networks, usually with Black women as the faces of the operation, ensured that my mother never felt what it meant to be “poor”.

Multigenerational households, often supported domestically, if not also financially, by Black women were also instrumental in her developing sense of what it meant to lead a family.

Through her own mother’s eyes, my mother learned not only how to care for a household and children, but also how to silently endure. She learned how to ignore her trauma and hide her pain behind a mask of strength. This is not a unique experience.<sup>111</sup>

Scholars, primarily in the psychology discipline, have analyzed the experiences of Black women in the United States and have acknowledged the existence of the strong Black woman model.<sup>112</sup> This model is so pervasive that, as Maria S. Johnson has stated, “... many Black women conceptualize struggle as an essential element of Black womanhood and respond to life situations in ways that are aligned with strength

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<sup>111</sup> For more on this see: Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “‘You Have to Show Strength’ An Exploration of Gender, Race, and Depression,” *Gender and Society* 21, no. 1 (February 2007): 28-51; Tamara Nelson, Naysha N. Shahid, and Esteban V. Cardemil, “‘Do I Really Need to Go and See Somebody?’ Black Women’s Perceptions of Help-Seeking for Depression,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 46, no. 4 (2020): 263-286.

<sup>112</sup> For more on this see: A.T. Moody, G.P. Owens, and J.A. Lewis, “Gendered Racism, Coping, and Traumatic Stress Among Black Women: The Moderating Roles of the Strong Black Woman Schema and Womanist Attitudes,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (June 2023): 197-212; C. Nicole White, Suzanne Swan, and Bobbi Smith, “Trauma, Help-Seeking, and the Strong Black Woman,” *Journal of Black Psychology*, (July 2023): 31.

rhetoric.”<sup>113</sup> This was apparent throughout my mother’s interviews and the way in which she related traumatizing events in her life. Bearing witness to the continued abuse of her mother and siblings, being subjected to rigid obedience training, and knowing that her father had been shot by her uncle, left a clear impact on her consciousness and yet, she is reluctant to describe them as trauma. She rejects the implication of experiencing historical in the form of postmemory. As Nelson et al. have observed, depression and other forms of mental illness tend to be conceptualized as weakness among Black women and therefore help-seeking is less acceptable to them.<sup>114</sup> When asked how she responds to traumatic events, she related that, “I always tried to do more [go] over and above, just so that I would be seen as I’m going somewhere.”<sup>115</sup> This translates to a desire to mask emotional pain and suffering with competence and achievement—the strong Black woman—rather than confronting the reality of the traumatic nature of the event in her life.

Into adulthood, my mother continued to experience a cycle of suffering due to the “demons” of others that began—for her—with her father. Her father, brother, uncle, and husband all battled with the demon that is addiction. For her father and

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<sup>113</sup> Maria S. Johnson, “Strength and Respectability: Black Women’s Negotiation of Racialized Gender Ideals and the Role of Daughter-Father Relationships,” *Gender and Society* 27, no. 6 (December 2013): 891.

<sup>114</sup> Tamara Nelson, Naysha N. Shahid, and Esteban V. Cardemil, “‘Do I Really Need to Go and See Somebody?’ Black Women’s Perceptions of Help-Seeking for Depression,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 46, no. 4 (2020): 266.

<sup>115</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

uncle, it was alcohol, for her brother and husband it was crack cocaine. The cycle of being traumatized and re-traumatized in similar ways is indicative of a pattern in the lives of Black women. For instance, my mother's encounter with the crack-cocaine epidemic was not a singular event. The drug had much broader implications for not just her and her family but for entire Black communities.<sup>116</sup> The once tightly knit survival networks began to fray.

TS: Were you aware of [any] community impacts that the crack-cocaine epidemic was having around you?

RW: Oh, yeah. You can just walk through our neighborhoods -- the Black neighborhoods [...] and tell. Cascade, Southwest Atlanta used to be a thriving African American neighborhood. I went to Brown High School right over in the West End. All my classmates, they grew up around Cascade and Kimble and Westmont and Avon and all those places. [...] They were just hard-working Black people lived in these neighborhoods. And then you saw the changes start to occur. People hanging on the corners. People breaking into people's houses. People just doing all kinds of things. Stealing from their neighbors, you know. My second oldest

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<sup>116</sup> For more see: Harry G. Levine and Craig Reinerman, "Crack in the Rearview Mirror: Deconstructing Drug War Mythology," *Social Justice* 31, no. 1/2 (2004): 182-199.

daughter, she was heading to the store and found a dead body in a house on the corner.<sup>117</sup>

She also recalls how the epidemic was perceived by others and in the media while communities, families, and individuals were suffering.

It was always like snickery jokes, "hee, hee, hee - oh they just a crackhead - hee, hee, hee." But there was nothing funny about crackheads. Because there's a person behind that crackhead. There's a family behind that crackhead. There's a community behind that crackhead. So, all those things are affected by a person when they start doing drugs.<sup>118</sup>

Yet, having learned the model of support from institutions within the Black community, my mother also found support in Al-Anon, created to assist families of addicts, to sustain her through difficult years. In my mother's case, the attributes of the strong Black woman instilled in her a drive to continually prove herself as a person of value to those around her. This was also true in how she handled her trauma in other areas of her life: she worked harder.

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<sup>117</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

<sup>118</sup> Rubennia Woods, February 18, 2022.

RW: I've always had good work ethics. Always. That's because I was always grateful for every position that I received because I worked hard for it, first off. And second of all, I believe that if you're given an opportunity, you should take advantage of that opportunity the best way you know how by doing the best that you can in that particular opportunity because not everyone is given it.<sup>119</sup>

My mother had a long, stable career with the City of Atlanta. Starting at the age

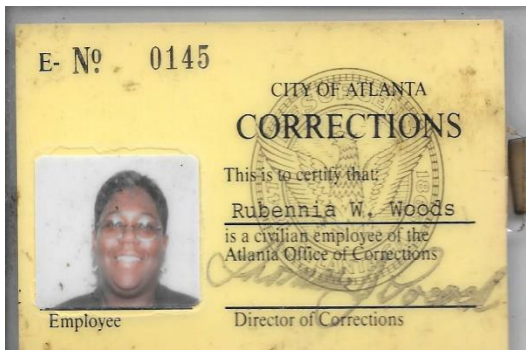


Figure 10: 2000, employee I.D. issued to Rubennia by the City of Atlanta Department of Corrections

of 19, she became the youngest person hired as a city clerk at that time. She progressed steadily with Atlanta's Pretrial Services until moving on to work for the Atlanta City Jail in an administrative role.

Her work ethic and drive to prove herself of worth led to many professional accomplishments.

I had a lot of functions I had to do. My job touched on just about every different unit in the jail -- Human Resources, Booking and ID, Housing, things like. I did attendance. I had a group of managers

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<sup>119</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, April 4, 2022.

that I had to do the attendance on. We housed federal prisoners. It was my job to track how many federal prisoners we had at a given time and charge the federal government for [them]. It was my job to keep up with how much money we were receiving in so far as cash bonds were concerned. I also did Workman's Comp. I had to track the Workman's Comp claims. I tracked Incident Reports. I wrote Legislation that is still on the books with the City of Atlanta today. So, with this particular job, not only was I working directly with the Chief [of Corrections], I worked with the City Council. I worked with the Law Department. And any other department around that I had to interact with in order to get the information or job done [...]. I loved my job.

[...]

If they tell me, it's something that, "Okay, we need this done." I go out and figure out how to do it. Come back and say, "Chief, this is how I think we should do this."... I've always been a competent employee. Always.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Rubennia Woods interviewed by Tre'Anna Stewart, April 4, 2022.

My mother and many other Black women from her generation exemplify that while the strong Black woman is a tool of survival, it is also a symbol of survivance.<sup>121</sup> Black women have gone far beyond just surviving their own personal and transgenerational traumas to thriving beyond what would have been thought possible immediately following Emancipation. The strong Black woman archetype remains a complex transgenerational model, eclipsing recognition of historical trauma, while acting as a driving force for accomplishment.

Black women's history has been suffused by analyses of powerhouse figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Madam C.J. Walker, and Rosa Parks among other "big" name actors of the past. In their own ways, each of these women are the epitome of the strong Black woman and their stories reflect that. However, while these legendary women have made meaningful impacts on our past and therefore our present day lives, their stories are not representative of the lives of everyday, working-class Black women. In no way is this an indictment against or a devaluation of the importance of the study of well-known Black women leaders, instead this is a call for more in-depth and widespread study of the myriad experiences

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<sup>121</sup> \*Survivance is a key term used in indigenous studies that refers to a population's ability to not only survive but to resist attempts by the dominant culture or popular majority to silence or otherwise erase the presence of the minority group. Survivance, in essence, is a cross section of survival and resistance. For more see: Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison Books, 1999); Lindsay M. Montgomery and Chip Colwell, *Objects of Survivance: A Material History of the American Indian School Experience* (University Press of Colorado, 2019).

that make up Black womanhood. In the past, much of Black history focused on the contributions of Black men while women's history tended to focus on White women.<sup>122</sup> This oral history project was rooted in the desire to understand what it was like for an everyday Black woman who lived in Atlanta during the mid-twentieth century and experienced many of the issues common to African American women. My mother's story revealed the social capital within the Black community in Atlanta, sustained by Black women church leaders and female family members. It exemplifies how the transgenerational model of the strong Black woman was both a weight to bear and a motivator to succeed in her professional life. The emotional burden of the Strong Black Woman is an example of a uniquely gendered African American form of postmemory, that is rooted in the violence of slavery and has been transmitted generation after generation to Black women.

My mother's oral history--in terms of support networks, the Strong Black Woman archetype, domestic and drug-related violence, and her drive to succeed—stands for the story of many Black women of her generation in the American South. While her story is rooted in the particularities of Atlanta, it can also be found in stories of women in other cities and towns where violence was endemic, the Black church was strong, and Black women sustained their families.

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<sup>122</sup> Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 4.

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