Njoki Nathani Wane

Reflections on the Mutuality of Mothering
Women, Children and Othermothering

> Your books and pens are the tools of your trade; master them, put them to good use. They will assist you ... until you find your destiny—a destiny different from mine. I do not know whether it will be better than mine. Look at you, you cannot even hold a hoe properly. I do not blame you; it is rough on hands. Look at my hands; see what years of struggle and hard work have done to my hands. Touch them! Rough, eee! (Recollection of my mother's repeated counsel, 1970) (Nathani 1996: 116).

When I was growing up in Kenya, my mother was always the first to rise and the last to go to bed. By the time the rest of the household was awake, she had been to the river and back; collected elephant grass from the riverbed for the cows; fed and milked them; swept the floors; and prepared a breakfast for the family. I normalized these acts of mother-work and gave little thought to what they meant to me, my mother, my siblings and the community at large. I now look back and realize that her sacrifices, hard work and commitment to change enabled me to be where I am today. It was her advice and refusal to treat girls differently than boys that instilled an intolerance of sexism in me. My mother's exemplary mothering practices, passed down to her by her own mother, must be passed down to my children. In "Passing the Torch: A Mother and Daughter Reflect on their Experience Across Generations," Bernard and Bernard examine how "Black mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social and political awareness" (47). As they eloquently state, Black mothers are expected to pass on the torch to "their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations" (47). As I discuss later in this paper

othermothers look after children whom they have no blood relations or legal obligation. There is usually a mutual agreement between mothers, aunts, uncles or fathers who play the role of othermothers in a given community. A woman elder who mothers both adult and children assumes community mothering on the other hand. She assumes leadership roles and she becomes a consultant for her community.[1]

This paper is a reflection on mothering. It is based on my Canadian mothering experiences and on the mothering experiences of the Embu women who participated in my research on the role of women in indigenous forms of food processing technologies. I do not want to essentialize, or idealize African motherhood or motherwork. I certainly do acknowledge the difficulties in mothering, especially when practised in the midst of other work, such as school activities, household chores or farm work. My intention is to illustrate and underscore how women interweave motherhood and other aspects of their lives.

In 1991, after a one-year separation, my three-year-old daughter came to live with me in Toronto. I would have brought her with me at the time of my admission, but there was no vacancy at the university's family housing. Although enrolled as a full-time student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, the decision to bring my daughter to Canada as soon as I got an apartment was an easy one. I knew I could organize for babysitting with other mothers in the family residence. Coming from Kenya, a neo-colonial country that was experiencing the effects of structural adjustment policies (SAPs), including substantial cutbacks in the social services, I was more than prepared to mother my child here on a limited student budget. At no time did I imagine that her presence might interfere with my studies. Feminist writers, including Gloria T. Emeagwali (1985), Patricia Stamp (1992) and Vandana Shiva (1990), assert that SAPs[2] reflect patriarchal guidelines and depend on patriarchal social relations at the household, community, national and global levels to support the entire structural adjustment process. The reduction of government and donor support for social services has increased the work done by women in the home and community; strengthened the gender division of labour in the household economy; and reduced women's access to formal employment. Lower household incomes have forced women and girls to engage in difficult and unpaid household work. Not surprisingly, the implementation of SAPs has brought increased suffering to the poor, particularly to women and children who have had to bear the heaviest burden of the current economic crisis in Kenya. Many women have had to resort to traditional methods of social organizing that rely upon pooling resources. Their communal activities include helping each other with farm work, and raising funds for school projects or tuition through *Harambee (*the Swahili word for "let us pull together").

Although women have formed mutual groups as a way to deal with the current cutbacks, the social formation of mutual groups reflects the principles

of African collectivism. In other words, they form in response to the needs of a community, a village or a group of women. The mutual groups hold no set rules or written mandates to organize their collective efforts. By natural inclination, the group members know their obligations. There are different types of mutual groups seeking different goals, but all are governed by communal needs. For instance, some groups meet to help a mother who has given birth. Others meet to work collectively on members' farms and share the plowing, planting, weeding and harvesting of crops. The only form of remuneration is reciprocity, cohesiveness, and strengthened community ties. In some instances, mutual groups meet once a month. The purpose for the meeting is to contribute money to a common fund, and each member receives the money on a rotational basis. Women's collective efforts have given them voice and confidence, and enabled many African women to own property, send their children to school, and raise their families' standard of living. When my daughter arrived in Canada, I did not hesitate to find out whether or not similar principles of mutuality would work in Toronto.

Harambee Spirit in Toronto

Within a few weeks of my daughter's arrival, I talked to four other mothers in my apartment building. We agreed to take turns picking up our girls from daycare and babysitting for each other. This schedule was organized on a weekly basis, so each mother would pick up the children only twice or three times each semester (thirteen weeks in one semester). In addition, our arrangement involved feeding, bathing and assisting the five children with their homework. As a result, the five of us, who were graduate students at the University of Toronto, were able to schedule our classes, study routines and work without worrying about babysitting arrangements. The communal childcare arrangements I made upon my daughter's arrival in Canada were not new to me. I had come from a community where a child is not the sole responsibility of the biological mother, but the responsibility of the larger community.[3]

When I first came to Canada, my niece, who was still breast-feeding her own daughter, did not hesitate to mother my daughter during my absence. Therefore, it was quite natural for me to talk to other women who had children of my daughter's age and arrange for community mothering. We had very little in common except for the fact that we were all graduate students. We came from different cultural backgrounds and different parts of the world. Three mothers were from Africa, one from Europe and one from Lebanon. But we trusted each other, despite the fact that we barely knew one another. This paper explores the roots of my mothering experiences in Canada as a single parent, graduate student and Kenyan woman.

Roots of African motherhood

A brief survey of pre-colonial and colonial societies is useful in understand-

ing the structure upon which African motherhood is based. Most of pre-colonial Africa was founded upon and sustained by collectivism. Social systems sought to achieve a balance between the physical and metaphysical world by being in tune with, rather than in opposition to, nature (Nathani, 1996). Communal and cooperative values were privileged over individualism and accumulation. Labour was organized along parallel rather than hierarchical lines, thus giving equal value to male and female labour. Social organization was based on the principle of patrilineal or matrilineal descent, or a combination of both Mothering practices were organized as a collective activity (Nathani, 1996).

During the colonial and neo-colonial period, my mothers and grandmothers still employed the mothering practices that had been passed down to them. They still prepared foods, bananas, yams, arrowroot, green vegetables and fruits, using the traditional methods. They would roast, boil or fry foods, then mash them using a pestle and mortar to make them soft for their children. My mother breast-fed us until our milk teeth starting falling out. I still recall that when something would get into my eye, my mother would open the eye wide and either blow on it or use her tongue to remove the object. Our mothers, aunties, sisters and community mothers carried us on their backs until some of us were ready for second *Mambura*.[4] Boys and girls learnt to take care of young ones, to balance them on our backs and feed them. Seven-year-old children were taught how to carry newborn babies on their backs, and taught how to comfort them if they cried. Women like my mother played an integral role in ensuring that such community mothering practices survived. These women practised what they preached.

However, during the colonial period schooling interfered with mothering practices. Initially, only boys were sent to school.[5] As a result girls had to carry out the boys' work, which included looking after the herds and running errands, in addition to their own work. It also meant the mothers and the grandmothers had to adjust their mothering practices. The mothers were conscious of the fact that caring for young siblings, a duty that had previously been shared by boys and girls, had now become the girls' responsibility. It was not long, however, before various communities realized there was a benefit to sending all children to school regardless of their gender. Unfortunately, in addition to attending school, girls were still expected to carry out their household chores.

By the time Kenya achieved independence in 1963, most people believed that a Western education was beneficial. Unfortunately, the cutbacks introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank eroded educational opportunities in Kenya, particularly for women. The cutbacks that marked independence forced many women to adjust their lives to accommodate all the mothering responsibilities bestowed upon them. During my research, it was evident that mothering responsibilities had tripled. Due to the social cutbacks, the government has reduced funding for pre-school institutions, hospitals and higher education. Women are expected to care for children

who are unable to attend pre-school, prepare traditional herbs for the sick, and engage in fund raising to send their children to university. As previously discussed, women have had to rely on their collectivism in order to cope with the impact of SAPs. Women have had to compensate for the loss of government services due to SAPs in the areas of health, education and economics. Despite the cutbacks, Embu women have not relinquished their responsibility of educating, socializing and "passing on the torch" to the next generation.

To situate motherwork in African contexts requires one to examine how African women in their local, everyday lived realities negotiate the meanings of mothering. During my research in Kenya I could not help but admire women's commitment to their children and community. For example, Wangeci, a single mother with a grade-seven education told me she had made a commitment to her ten-year-old daughter when she was born:

> *I will sacrifice my life for this baby. I will do what it takes to make sure that she does not end up like me, no education, no money and no land. At present I am not sure how I will do it. But all I know is her life will be different and better than mine. I let my mother down by dropping out of school, I have to do something that will make her know that her efforts, her sacrifices were not in vain... it appears pretty hopeless now, but I know things will change.* (interview, 1994)

In her late 20s, Wangeci spoke with determination and dignity. I was not surprised when I visited her two years later to find that she had managed to send her daughter to a private boarding school. When I asked her how that was possible, she pointed to her head, then spread out her hands to show me the palms and almost in a whisper she said:

> *Hard work. I work in peoples' homes, on farms and in coffee plantations or factories. At the end of the day, people offer me grains, beans, cash or space to cultivate my own food. Once I have accumulated enough grains/beans, I sell them and save the money. I get very little for the work I do, but as the saying goes "kidogo, kidogo ndio kina jascha kipapa" (bits and pieces fill the pocket or a penny earned is a penny saved).* (interview, 1996)

Wangeci's main goal is to educate her daughter. Among African people, there is a saying that when you educate a girl, you educate a whole clan. Wangeci might not be an orator, or a renowned feminist; nonetheless her commitment to make a difference in her daughter's life speaks volumes. Wangeci is an activist who is very aware of the struggles and sacrifices she must make as a mother to provide her children with the opportunity for better lives.

Nyawira, a woman in her mid-sixties was another participant in my research. She has five children who have all completed their secondary education. She spoke of her children with passion:

Although all my children are grown and live in the city, I still prepare large amounts of foods. I recall many times, I would prepare homemade cookies to go and sell to raise school fees. Sometimes I did not sell even one, and some other times I sold everything. I sacrificed everything I had to put my children through school. My husband had to sell part of our land to raise school fee. But here I am alone. All my children have moved to the city. I am lonely, but I am happy for them. (interview, 1994)

Situating these women's narratives in pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial knowledges on mothering enables us to understand the dilemma mothers face in contemporary Africa. However, I would like to state that although there are commonalities in mothering practices across African communities, I do not wish to generalize about these practices because African communities are not homogeneous. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a shared African philosophy that views parenting, especially mothering, as an integral component in the survival of African traditions and cultures.

The practice of mothering is not universal, and the way it is conceived, celebrated and practiced differs across cultures. In some instances, mothering as a practice is portrayed as oppressive and problem-laden both socially and culturally. For example, in Western feminist legal theory, motherhood has often been seen as problematic for women because mothers are seen to embody dependency while simultaneously being trapped by the dependency of others (Fineman, 1995: xi). Thus, motherhood, based on Western ideologies, tends to be conceptualized as a dutiful obligation. Often women's economic and social problems are presented as partially or primarily linked to motherhood (Fineman, 1995: xi). Western feminists often promote the notion of "shared parenting" as one possible solution to the social problems that have come to be linked to mothering. Typically, they envision fathers as "equal" parents with corresponding rights and obligations within the context of an egalitarian family. As a result, western feminist theorists often continue to privilege patriarchal family structures, and subsequently continue to formulate social and legal policies that position the nuclear family as the paradigmatic core social institution (Fineman. 1995: xi).

The notion of "ideal" or "good" mothering and the culturally specific assumption that a woman must be a mother before she is considered a mature, balanced, and fulfilled adult, promotes compulsory motherhood. In other words, it promotes the belief that becoming pregnant, giving birth, and exhibiting nurturing behavior are integral to fulfilling one's gendered destiny (Kline, 1995: 118). According to Wearing:

A "good" mother is always available to her children, she spends time with them, guides, supports, encourages and corrects as well as [loves] and [cares] for them physically. She is also responsible for the cleanliness of their home environment. A "good" mother is unselfish;

she puts her children's need before her own. (Wearing qtd. in Kline, 1995: 118-120)

Kline explains that motherhood has been ideologically constructed as compulsory only for those women considered "fit," and not for women who have been judged "unfit" on the bases of their social location. During the last century, this has held true for disabled women, Black women, First Nations women, immigrant women, Jewish women, lesbian women, women who are the sole-support of parents, poor women, unmarried women, young women and others (1995: 120-121).

The social construction of the good or ideal mother demonstrates the extent to which mothering remains a site of struggle. Slaughter argues that, "The forces of social power are always at war. "[Our] task [as women] is to resist and unmask the power behind the institutions and discourses that name" (1995: 77). The ideology of motherhood, therefore, speaks not only to gender roles and behavior, but also privileges specific locations within the social relations of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. Historically, White, middle-class and able-bodied women have been most likely to be viewed as "appropriate" mothers as Kline notes:

> Thus, motherhood is better conceptualized as a privilege than a right, a privilege that can be withheld, both ideologically and in more material ways, from women who are not members of the dominant groups in society or who are otherwise considered unfit. Within this framework, so-called unfit women who want to have children are often confronted with serious barriers and difficulties. The bad mother, by corollary, is constructed as the 'photographic negative' of the good mother. (Kline, 1995: 122)

It is my belief that assumptions about which women can and cannot be mothers or good mothers are a form of social control embedded in the capitalist mode of production and rooted in patriarchal systems. Ideally, assumptions about who constitutes a good mother would not be based on one model of mothering, but be determined in culturally and community specific contexts. In Toronto where people from various cultures often live together in the same building or in close proximity, individual mothers should be free to make choices about how to mother across cultural differences. This is what I have had to do in mothering my daughter. Understanding who I am as a person and the cultural contexts that have had an impact on my life have been the best preparations for being a parent. With a grounded understanding of "self," I have been able to better understand the different cultural environments in which I find myself and to begin choosing which aspects of these cultures to embrace as I mother my daughter away from my culture. Recognizing myself as a diaporic subject has also enabled me to more effectively address the challenges

mothers face when mothering away from their familiar communities. When attempting to understand differences in mothering practices, I have discovered that we tend to resort to the most readily available reference points—our own cultural frameworks. The use of a different cultural context as a basis for understanding mothering is inevitably challenging. However, having a strong cultural reference point is essential as women's mothering practices are often judged in relation to the institutionalized mothering practices carried out in schools and daycares, and represented by the media.

Mothering among African communities

Within African communities, mothering is not necessarily based on biological ties. Established African philosophy suggests that children do not solely belong to their biological parents, but to the community at large. This philosophy and tradition inform what we refer to as "other-mothering" and "community mothering." Significantly, even in the face of Western conceptions of mothering, which often view community-mothering practice as deviant and negligent, African understandings of mothering continue to thrive. Throughout the African Diaspora, Black women care for one another and one another's children regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Stanlie James clearly states that mothers among African American communities incorporate nurturing responsibilities for children other than their immediate offspring (1997: 45). Evidence indicating that this practice is still prevalent in African communities with polygynous relationships, suggests that shared parenting or othermothering is part of the value system inherent to pre-colonial Africa.

Othermothering in Black communities involves the same hard work, self-sacrifice, mentoring and love that Black women give their own children. The bonds that are created between those who mother and those who are mothered are passed down through a "lineage of mothering" (Wane and Adefarakan, forthcoming). Although I focus on Black women who mother children and one another, such practices exist beyond gender and racial boundaries. It is not unusual to find young boys mothering their younger siblings and uncles and fathers mothering their nieces and/or nephews. My mothering experiences in Toronto have also shown that women from different racial backgrounds may step in as othermothers or community othermothers. Othermothers usually care for children. Community mothers take care of the community. These women are typically past their childbearing years. They are usually charismatic and embrace a communal spirit. According to James: "Based upon her knowledge and her respected position, a community othermother is also in a position to provide analyses and/or critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well being of her community" (1997: 48). This is not to suggest, however, that community othermothering does not differ from culture to culture.

"Othermothers" may also be defined as mothers who assist blood mothers in the responsibility of child care for short or long-term periods, in informal or

formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin (James, 1997: 45). They not only serve to relieve some of the stress that can develop between children and parents but also provide multiple role models for children. As othermothers and community othermothers, Black women keep the traditional African value systems of communal sharing and ownership alive. James argues that the entire community benefits from Black women's motherwork and suggest that it serves as "an important Black feminist link to the development of new models for social transformation" (1997: 45). In short, whether we are mothers, othermothers or community othermothers, African traditional notions of community are functional strategies that sustain the survival of African peoples all over the world.

As an African woman, I am gravely concerned about the way in which racist and colonial discourses have constructed Black female-headed households. While the dominant society denigrates Black single motherhood, and often dismisses these women as welfare queens, Black female-headed households have been the core of survival for African peoples in Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe. When Black men were absent from home due to migratory labour, family abandonment or other reasons, Black women were left with the difficult and challenging task of caring for themselves, their children, and other community members.

Mothering within African communities can be understood as a form of cultural work or as one way communities organize to nurture both themselves and future generations (James, 1997: 44). Among Embu women, mothering is a cultural phenomenon. Women without children prepare meals as if they are expecting a number of children for both the midday and evening meals. If no child drops by, the women pack the food and take it to a home where there are children. The actions of such women stand as evidence of the extent to which mothering is not limited to females with biological offspring, but is a community practice (James, 1997: 44). For example, women in traditionally polygynous relationships, who are compatible with each other, often share the care of all the children in the household so they can more easily and efficiently carry out their daily responsibilities (James, 1997: 44). As James (1997) explains:

> In addition to patterns of shared childcare in polygynous households, childcare responsibilities were also diffused through the common African practice of fostering children. African communal societies were characterized by high degrees of interdependence and the belief that individual self-development and personal fulfillment were dependent upon the well being of all members of the community. Fostering children was one means of promoting these communal values and ensuring the likelihood of co-operative interaction. (46)

Thus, women in an African context do not foster children simply because

Njoki Nathani Wane

they are orphaned. Othermothering is a way of extending children's primary relationships to a larger number of people within the extended family and the community at large. It is also a way to relieve mothers from some of the responsibilities associated with nurturing young children. Similarly, community othermothering, a role usually preserved for"elders," recognizes the value of communal mothering practices.

Conclusion

Mothering is a very complex institution. It is only by documenting our mothering experiences and telling our stories that we can begin to understand and appreciate its complexity. Every time I visited my grandmothers as a child, they always had a story for me. Looking back, these stories did not always make sense to me at the time, but have now become my source of reference for mothering. Each story illustrated some aspect of our culture. From them, I learned about our culture, clan lineage, and rites of passage. Here in Toronto, I have tried to follow in my mothers' and grandmothers' footsteps. When my busy schedule permits, I sit with my daughter and tell her stories. I tell her stories about Kenya, and stories about the Embu people, my mothers, and grandmothers in particular. I do this with the hope that she will pass on these stories to her children, my grandchildren, and in so doing, pass on the torch to the next generation.

[1]For a more detailed discussion of the notion of community mothering in Africa, see James (1997).
[2]For further reading, see Emeagwali (1995).
[3]Coming from Kenya, subsidized day care services for children were quite new to me. My experiences with children services were interesting and informative. I was pleasantly relieved to learn that I would only pay a dollar a day for my daughter's daycare services.
[4]In traditional societies, the significant stages in one's life were marked by a special ceremony referred to as *Mambura*. The most celebrated stages were the birth of a child, ear piercing, circumcision for both girls and boys, and marriage rites. The ceremonies were marked by community gatherings. During these ceremonies there would be drinking, eating, dancing, rejoicing, and teaching. Unfortunately, by the time I initiated my own research on Kenyan community practices, most of these rites were no longer being practised. The practices had been outlawed, been rendered too lavish under the current economic conditions, or lost their significance.
[5]For further reading on the cultural barriers, see Mwagiru and Ouko (1989).

References

Bernard Wanda and Bernard Candace. 1998. "Passing the Torch. A Mother

and Daughter Reflect on Experiences Across Generation." *Canadian Women's Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 18 (2,3) (Summer/Fall): 46-50.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. "Black Women and Motherhood." *Black Feminist Thought; Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.* Second ed. Ed. Patricia Hill Collins. New York: Routledge 173-200.

Emeagwali, Gloria T., ed. 1995. *Women Pay the Price: Structural Adjustment in Africa and the Caribbean.* Trenton, New Jersey. African World Press, Inc.

Fineman, Martha Albertson and Karpin, Isabel, eds. 1995. *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Fineman, Martha. 1995. "Images of Mothers in Poverty Discourse." *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* Eds. Martha Fineman and Isabel Karpin. New York: Columbia University Press. 205-223.

James, Stanlie M. 1997. "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation." *Theorizing Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women.* Eds. Stanlie James and A P. Busia. Routledge. 44-54.

Kenyatta, Jomo. 1965. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu.* London, UK: Mercury Books.

Kline, Marlee. 1995. "Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women." *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* Eds. Martha Fineman and Isabel Karpin. New York: Columbia University Press. 118-141.

Nathani, Njoki. 1996. "Sustainable Development: Indigenous Forms of Food processing Technologies: A Kenyan Case Study." Unpublished Diss. University of Toronto.

Mwagiru, W. and Ouko, Riria. 1989. "Women in Development." *Kenya at a Glance.* Ed. Ahamed I. Salim. Nairobi. Colorprint Ltd. 246-259.

Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994. Molara. "African Women, Culture and Another Development." *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations.* Trenton: Africa World Press. 21-42

Omolade, Barbara. 1995. "'Making Sense': Notes for Studying Black Teen Mothers." *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* Eds. Martha Fineman and Isabel Karpin. New York: Columbia University Press. 270-288.

Robert, Dorothy. 1995. "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood." *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* Eds. Martha Fineman and Isabel Karpin. New York: Columbia University Press. 224-249.

Shiva, Vandana. 1990. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development.* London: Zed Books Ltd.

Slaughter, M. M. 1995. "The Legal Construction of 'Mother'." *Mothers In Law: Feminist Theory and the Legal Regulation of Motherhood.* Eds. M. Fineman and I. Karpin. New York: Columbia University Press. 73-141.

Stamp, Patricia. 1992. *Technology, Gender, and Power in Africa.* Ottawa: IDRC.

Wane, Njoki. 2000. "Indigenous Knowledge: Lessons from the Elders. A Kenyan Case Study." *Indigenous Knowledge in Global Context: Multiple Readings of Our World.* Eds. George Dei, Budd Hall, and Dorothy Rosenberg. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 95-108.

Wane, Nathani Njoki and Aferakan T. [forthcoming]. "Introduction: Theorizing Black Feminism." *Theorizing Black Feminism: A Critical Reader.* Eds. Njoki N. Wane and T. Aferakan. Toronto. Canadian Scholars Press.