"Just One Kind" of Southern Womanist Aesthetics: Ways Rural Black Women Established and Practiced a Culture of Self-Empowerment in the pre-Civil Rights South

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In much of the scholarship concerning American women, an overwhelming amount of attention has been given to middle- and upper-class women, especially White women. While White women's notions of womanhood have occupied tremendous intellectual space, middle-class urban Black women have garnished the majority of consideration within studies associated with Black women's lives. Emphasis on middle-class Black women is centered on club work and racial uplift through their work in education, church activities, and political activism. Contrastly, Black women who lived in rural spaces have received less attention. Scholars have focused primarily on issues related to labor and work that rural poor women performed domestically and agriculturally. Moreover, writers, such as Richard Wright and William Faulkner, have portrayed aspects of Black life in such rural places as Mississippi, but their attention was given primarily to the enduring violence, poverty, and brutality through which Black communities lived. These histories have come at the expense of telling other kinds of stories, ones, for example, that would describe how rural Black women established a way to empower themselves through their representations of self-defined cultural practices and artistic expressions.[1]

Studies analyzing how rural Black women created respect for themselves as well as

[1] The phrase, "rural Black women" is meant to be inclusive and it considers experiences of all women, including those who live on farms, plantations, and in small, rural towns. Together, they formed such categories as wage workers in fields, homes, shops, and later, after World War II, as laborers in factories; they were sharecroppers, farm renters, and owners of makeshift businesses. Some were landowners and others owned other forms of property; some were married, single, and widowed; still others were mothers and sisters; most were regular church goers, and some had some form education, while others completed high school.

critiqued and narrated their own lives are still needed. To comprehend differently some situations regarding southern rural life, we need histories that help us understand how rural Black women applied cultural meanings to their conditions (J. Jones, 2010, pp. 3–10).[2] Viewed largely as insubordinate and loud, rural Black women, like their urban counterparts, were never seen by members of the majority society as pure, pious, submissive, domestic, beautiful, and moral. For many Whites, Blacks only seemed capable of manifesting behaviors that confirmed some Whites' belief in supremacy and Black inferiority (Fredrickson, 1988, pp. 112–188, 189–215).[3] In spite of well documented cases of domination and cultural misrepresentation, some rural Black women in the South created their own notions of womanhood and sisterhood to establish a culture of their own that appreciated their feelings, thoughts, and actions.[4] For example, by artistically illustrating in public spaces (any space outside of the walls of the home) ways in which they internalized gendered-specific domestic tasks and familial responsibilities, some rural Black women acted as agents of survival and change. These were persons who helped improve the spiritual and material conditions of their families and communities through their own sense of what some scholars have called the personal and the political—a sense of empowerment that concerned establishing philosophies that bestowed such values as respectability and acceptability.

For many mid-twentieth-century southern rural Black women, ideas of Black womanism were not new. In history, Black women such as Jarena Lee, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth symbolized a Black womanist approach, women who were invested in saving the race, while demanding respect for themselves as women. From their work in slavery and freedom, questions have evolved concerning Black women's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. How did these and

[2] For a comparison, see Friedman, 1990, pp. xi–xvi, 3–38; Giddings, 1984, pp. 85–94, 183–198, 325–336; Gilmore, 1996, pp. 31–90.
[3] See also Baker, 1964; Cash, 1991, pp. vii–xli, 3–102; Billings, Jr., 1979; Cobb, 1999, 2005; Hahn, 2003.
[4] For a discussion of these kinds of realities Black women endured, see Hunter, 1997; Rogers, 2006; Tucker, 1988.

other Black women like them create philosophies, strategies, and practices that raised their valuation of themselves; and how did their perception of themselves as women of rural descent help to sustain Black families and communities? While the answers to these queries are still evolving, we do know that, on the aforementioned women's backs, stood late-nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century Black women who understood, that for their communities to survive, Black women had to create spaces of their own, where they carved out emotional and physical spaces where they could express and build their lives in a country that respected whiteness, patriarchy, and even Black male domination. In the interest of racial uplift, self-awareness and self-expression philosophies were adapted by Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells during the late nineteenth century, by such women as Mary McLeod Bethune during the first half of the twentieth century, and later in the second half of the twentieth century, by activist women like Fannie Lou Hamer. Each contributed efforts that forged a Black womanist perspective concerning respectability and acceptability within their respective communities, while also empowering themselves to narrate their own stories.[5]

Scholars writing about these struggles have noted that Black women have had to be inventive in addressing their oppression and that of Black men and children. Glenda Gilmore (1996), in *Gender and Jim Crow*, argues that Black women have forged their ideas of gender and race equity within their families. Their educational experiences and voluntary activities tested and refined those beliefs. Some Black women did so by not functioning within the confines of monolithic concepts of a woman's place, but by using the experiences they confronted living in a sexist and racist society to challenge and meet everyday adversity (Gilmore, p. 32).[6]

[5] See Cooper, 1892/1990; Brewer, 1981, pp. 12–15; A. Walker, 1983; Lee, 1999; Murray, 1998; Bundles, 2001.

[6] For a discussion of the culture of White racial and gender supremacy and how it challenged southern rural Black women to make a difference in their culture, community, and family life, see Allen, 1931; Flynn (1983), especially chapters two, "The Moral Violence of the Caste System," and six, "Caste, Class, and the Persistence of Southern Poverty."

Rural Black women's need to define their own womanist aesthetics, then, is closely related to how they have been viewed by members of the larger society and by how they have been addressed and treated in spaces defined by men and Whites. Ostracized and devalued, they experienced feelings of isolation and alienation. As a result, they began to look inside, within their primary environment, in their day-to-day existences, to create spaces of womanist empowerment. In 1981, Alice Walker published in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* to show how her mother, in the midst of southern rural and racial domination, found her voice through the creation of her own aesthetic and the expressive culture she established around gardening and the creation of beautiful flowers. Walker writes:

> My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see. Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena… and on and on. (p. 241)

In rural Alabama, where the oppression of Blacks was quite onerous before the Civil Rights era, Walker's mother, in essence, established, through her hands, a vision of herself as an independent woman, rich in spirit, health, ideas, and creativity. This is a model that creatively positions Black women as aesthetically different within the cult of "true" womanhood. For Black women, the unique ability to minimize the impact of segregation and oppression on their families, while finding ways to contribute economically to create a womanist culture that they valued, were the important steps needed to build any foundation in order to redefine their womanhood. Their womanism was established through their creativity and their labor. Like

Walker, nearly every single Black child observing their parents' labor could see that, during the workday in the field, their mother labored beside and not behind their father and that because this labor was valuable, it created social, spiritual, and physical spaces for rural Black women to establish a culture of creativity that valued them as contributors (Carrie Gordon, interview with the author, March 15, 1987; A. Walker, 1983, pp. 231–243).

Sabine Broeck's (2001) perspective concerning a Black womanist aesthetic provides one way to understand the kind of womanism Walker's mother and other rural Black women practiced. Broeck's model suggests that Black women's womanist aesthetic allows us to:

> affirm life located in and lived by a black female body; elaborate on and build connections to and respect for the anonymous and hitherto lost folk such as children, old men, and female ancestors; recuperate and witness African American traditions in folklore, mass culture, and high culture; and pronounce interest in the "kitchen crisis," that is the everyday mundane versus the display of pathos (Broeck, "The Urgency of Petunias: Womanism as Cultural Intervention," in Jurgen Heidekiug, Jorg Helbig, and Anke Orflepp, eds., The Sixties Revisited: Culture, Society, and Poetics (p. 404).[7]

The benefit of using a Black womanist aesthetic model to examine and interpret the experiences of southern rural Black women is that such an approach, Broeck (2001) further suggests, "opens space for a black female visceral, mental, and psychological interiority and subjectivity that achieves a representation of black women as agents of their own communities' lives, creates a counter history which black women inhabit no longer as the ubiquitous mules of the worlds, and acknowledges black women's roles in the creation of day to day cultures in the United States," as they established *A Room of One's Own*, like Virginia Woolf, while realizing that they could not afford failure (p. 405).

Consequently, then, Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* provides a model useful for connecting the oppression of rural Black women to women's struggles in general. For this

[7] The quote is taken from Walker in an interview given to *MS* magazine, entitled "Writing to Survive."

author, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* is a text that continues to offer a path leading to more critical and feminist analyses, ones that would require a reevaluation of marginalized women in the creation of spaces where their self-created material culture, art communication, spiritual reproduction, and community work are linked to acts of resistance and change. Indeed, as Broeck (2001) argues, Walker, by using her mother's garden to illustrate the literal beauty and creativity of rural Black women's genius to create "high culture" outside of established White channels, connected her mother's revolutionary petunias to the emancipatory power of Black women and to Virginia Woolf's self-defined space, *A Room of One's Own* (pp. 405–409).

What follows in this examination is a discussion of how some Black women in the rural South before the Civil Rights era reflected the ideas of Walker's mother's garden and Broeck's womanist aesthetic approaches. Analysis will show how southern rural Black women, in the midst of racial and economic oppression, created a room of their own—a figurative, though emotional, cultural space in which they defined and represented themselves through their voice and art as a form of agency and resistance. As presented here, my discussion of "just one kind" of rural Black womanist aesthetics draws primarily on oral history research, interviews I began conducting in the late 1980s with rural African American women who are/were residents primarily of the Delta region of the state of Mississippi.[8] In gathering their stories of rural Black life in the South, I have continued to employ what some scholars are now commonly calling the

[8] From 1987 to 1990, twenty-five interviews concerning rural Black women and empowerment were conducted with women of the Brooks Farm, a community that was established in Drew, Mississippi, in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta region. Brooks Farm was established in the early 1900s by P. H. Brooks, a wealthy White planter from Virginia. It evolved into a community of Black landowning families, primarily during the 1940s. At its height, by the 1950s, at least 167 families lived there, with an average of 8 children per household. Between 1910 and 1970, families in Brooks Farm built 9 churches and 4 schools, established recreation facilities and parks for their children, engaged in the Civil Rights movement, and pushed for liberation from paternalism using technology and wage-earning away from the farm. Many stories were told to me by Willie McWilliams, who was born in Brooks Farm in 1917. (Willie McWilliams, interview with the author, June 10, 1989). See also A. Walker, 1983, pp. 231–243. For a full contextualization of a Black womanist aesthetic in the search for voice, agency, and identity, see Broeck, 2011.

gerontological approach to oral history research. This approach takes into consideration the age of the people being interviewed and it allows the researcher to observe life (beginnings, middles, and ends) over a period of time, while taking into consideration that new awareness may evolve. The gerontological approach permitted the opportunity for women's voices to be heard uninterruptedly, which allowed me the capacity to capture multifaceted aspects of their existences during critical times in their lives. As this discussion will show, I was able to discover, with some rural Black women, themes of self-reliance and, by combining the narrative gerontological approach with an understanding of resilience theory, the articulations presented herein provide an understanding as to how some rural Black women found meaning in their experiences, as they encountered joy with despair, pain, and suffering. Going forward, it is the women's voices that speak to their existences and aesthetics—philosophies I have termed motherhood, womanhood, sisterhood, and culture-hood—explaining how they established and practiced a culture of empowerment.[9]

Motherhood: A Spiritual Aesthetic of Continuance

Within the context of rural American existences that included domination and oppression of certain racial groups, the poor, and women, a rural Black womanist aesthetic evolved from their ideas and notions associated with motherhood. Motherhood responsibilities became eventual practices in which rural Black women engaged to diminish the importance that racist and class ideologies emphasized regarding Black extinction and extermination.

Within states where lynching was a form of elimination and where mass imprisonment and manufactured debts were implemented to kill and starve rural Black families and place them

[9] For a discussion of the gerontological approach utilized in oral history research methods, see Randall & Kenyon, 2004; Bindas, 2010; Green, 2008.

on a road to extinction, southern rural Black women performed many traditional roles to help their families and communities resist racial extermination. They managed the household, doing the cleaning and cooking, and generally providing for their spouses and children. They worked in the fields and, when time permitted, they took care of the sick and elderly and organized community functions. But it was their ethic of care and nurturing, rooted in a spiritual idea of continuance—believing that God had purposed them to produce children and to train them to hope beyond extinction—that resulted in some southern rural Black women believing that their "calling" consisted of not only building strong families, but ways of being, doing, and thinking that showed they did not accept elimination or extinction. Such thinking, according to Willie McWilliams, was critical to creating a community culture that believed in development and improvement and an aesthetic emphasized continuance.

Rural Black women, such as those who lived in Brooks Farm, therefore, internalized their work as establishing a philosophy of spiritual continuance that resulted in them encouraging their children to believe that Black people would live and not die out. Because of this view, then, the focus of the children's training was primarily with understanding how to live in the earth (in southern, segregated American communities) and as a perpetual people. Within this context, morals and skills that were passed on to children consisted of ways to resist extermination. Children engaged in activities that revealed their understanding of themselves and of their commitment to the spiritual continuance (through prayer) of Black people and of Black life. By doing so, it was understood that their actions of giving and loving, for example, would not accommodate persistent feelings of death—the killing of Black people in perpetuity. Among the many examples that serve as illustrations of rural Black women's aesthetic of continuance are the ways in which they nurtured children and taught them the art of care.

Within the home, children held a special place, similar to the way in which plants were carefully situated in the hills, holes, and furrows of gardens. Rural Black women valued children like they depended on plants. Both were critical to families' survival and both were needed to sustain the community's welfare. As plants had to be nurtured for a family to receive an increase in its food supply, so too did care have to be provided to children, so they could give economic support, help to continue cultural understanding, and act as eventual social agents for their families and communities. To achieve these objectives, mothers nurtured and groomed their children to be good workers and law-abiding citizens. For instance, they provided their children with constant instructions concerning how to respond to Whites when away from home, reminding them of the social mores regarding looking at and speaking to Whites, where to stand in lines, where and how to walk on sidewalks, and how to properly address all White people. Rural Black women in the South understood that violation of any of these unwritten rules was an opportunity for the Black race to be exterminated. Their motherhood emphasized a type of mothering that communicated to their children that being was the ultimate form of continuance and that, prior to the Civil Rights movement, it (being as existing) was, in rural Black America, a cultural aesthetic practice that resisted complete personal domination. "Once the children was born," says Ocean Myes, "the women took over and became responsible for they life" (Interview with the author, June 11, 1990).[10] "This meant," she continues, "that the children was goin' to have everything they need, includin' lots of love, devotion, and discipline so they would know that they had to love people, be committed to their family, and show respect" (Interview with the author, June 11, 1990).[11] More importantly, adds Mae Liza Williams, "The women look after the children, makin' sure that they didn't get hurt and that they understood how to care for theyself"

[10] See also Lerner, 1992; Hale, 1999, pp. 85–120, especially the section, entitled, "Motherhood in Black and White."
[11] See also Simonsen, 1976; Johnson, 1941; Archer, 1992.

(Mae Liza Williams, interview with the author, May 28, 1989).[12]

Any aesthetic that related to the continuation of Black life meant that ideas concerning motherhood and proper mothering took into consideration not only the philosophical and spiritual thinking that rural Black children needed to practice, but also processes that transferred physical and material skills that were foundational to resisting extinction, extermination, and elimination. Black children in rural communities usually received their first training (apprenticeships of sort) directly from their mothers. Ignoring sex, gender, and the sexual division of labor, women in Brooks Farm, for example, usually trained both boys and girls to cook, clean, and wash. "I taught all eight of my children," says Willie McWilliams, "to do all kind of work in the field and house." "I work out a schedule so that all of them could be in the kitchen at different times," McWilliams continues, "since the boys had to be outside the most, I try to work with them more on rainy days and weekends" (Interview with the author, June 10, 1989).[13] "On Saturday morning," for example, "I would get the boys to help with the washin' by havin' them haul water and sometimes hangin' up clothes, and, on Sunday, I brought them in the kitchen to show them how to fix certain foods as I was cookin'" (Interview with the author, June 10, 1989).[14] "And when I took them to work in the fields," she adds, "I taught each child, boy and girl, how to plant, hoe, and pick cotton and how to work in the garden" (Interview with the author, June 10, 1989).[15]

In addition to teaching children how to work, southern rural Black women had the responsibility of developing children's confidence through moral persuasion. Moral and spiritual training emphasized cooperation, respect, obedience, and sacrifice (Minnie Brown, interview

[12] See also J. Jones, 2010, pp. 79–109.
[13] See Edwards, 1993; J. Jones, 1981.
[14] See also Holland, 1997.
[15] See also L. Jones, 2002.

with the author, June 5, 1989).[16] Recognizing that communal efforts had sustained Black rural and farm communities for decades, women gave lessons on the importance of sharing. "I can remember my mama always tellin' me I had to share not only with my brother and sister, but also with other children in the community," says Maxine Johnson. "This meant," she continues, "that I grew up sharin' my lunch at school with children who didn't have any, my clothes with my cousin, and knowledge with my friends who didn't know how to do their homework" (Interview with the author, January 5, 1990).[17] "The basic lesson women taught their children," Irene Scott adds, "was that they should treat other people how they want to be treated, talk to people the way they want folk to talk to them, and just do unto other the way they would have folk do unto them" (Interview with the author, April 28, 1987).[18]

Other examples of rural Black women practicing an aspect of their motherhood aesthetic can be seen according to the manner in which they desired their children to think about their bodies. Black children carried many scars regarding their skin color. Mothers attempted to lift their distress by focusing on how they presented their children's hair and how they clothed their children's bodies. While members of the majority society had grown accustomed to referring to Black children as pickaninnies and nappy heads, Black children's hair became material that mothers presented artfully to the public. Girls' hair was braided into different designs, linked together by plaits that formed various kinds of tracks throughout and across the head, connected by pony tails that bore all kinds of ribbons, and placed in curls that carried many different twists. Girls' hair became the opportunity for mothers to make their natural beauty colorful, with handmade ribbons in different styles that branded their own beauty aesthetic. Boys possessed artful cuts with parts and waves to communicate they were handsome, smart, clean, and

[16] See also M. Walker, 2002.
[17] For a comparison and historical context, see Anderson, 1996.
[18] See also Sharpless, 1999.

respectful (Addie White, interview with author, July 12, 1990). In rural public places, Black people's hair was always seen as a representation of their culture and intellect. Hair was an extension of the body and like life, mothers required their children to see it as a continuum, a perspective that held that, as life changed, so would hair, and together Black people would always struggle to be respected.

The fashion some rural Black women adopted to dress their children indicated they viewed such an act not only as keeping their children from being seen as naked, but also as a process by which they were covering them in life and in perpetuity. Homemade clothes were blankets of love, the kind that would help Black children understand how to endure and be long-suffering in the interest of resisting White domination and extermination (Bernice Jones, interview with the author, August 18, 1989). Some of the women in Brooks Farm explained that southern rural Black women gave considerable attention to their children's clothes, spending long hours making pretty dresses and shirts. Dresses were often trimmed in lace and so were the matching undergarments of slips and underwear that mothers made to compliment them. Even when women had to use flour and meal sacks as cloth, they sometimes dyed the fabric, sewing beautiful buttons on it, creating designs either in the shape of symbols or insects like butterflies, and added fancy belts and buckets. Mothers commonly took old attachments from the blouses, shirts, and pants of parents and grandparents and used them to make designs for their children's jackets, shirts, and blouses. Because of a lack of resources, bedspreads and quilts, too, were made from scrap cloth, "because we couldn't 'ford to buy them kind of thing," explained Ocean Myes. "My mama, grand mama, her mama, and I thought in this way," Ocean Myes continued, "'cause there was no other way to think 'bout it when you had more skills than money and when

you was expected to do your part" (Interview with the author, June 11, 1990).[19] Even though women had to plan strategically when to spend money and time on making clothes for children, much care was given to the artistic presentation of children's clothes and hair because they regularly presented their bodies in public spaces outside their communities and they were on frequent display during church and school performances, where they delivered Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas speeches, while manifesting the hope and creative genius of their mothers and grandmothers.

As the above descriptions chow, southern rural Black women's commitment to the care and supervision of children provided ways for their offsprings to feel valued and also to learn how to give and show love. This was important in a culture where rural Black children were not loved or safely guarded in a racialized space that specialized in demeaning Black people and treating them as throwaways. This feeling of appreciation for this particular expression of rural Black womanist aesthetics was observed by Zora Neale Hurston. In *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942/2006), her autobiography, Hurston, a native of rural Eatonville, Florida, recalled a beautiful comfortable place with an abundance that made life's hardships easier. She described a community of people with plenty of food, fruit turned into preserves, and bountiful rivers of fresh fish available for everyone to feast on:

> We had chicken on the table often; home cured meat, and all the eggs we wanted…. We had a big barn, and a stretch of ground well covered with Bermuda grass. So on moonlight nights, two-thirds of the village children from seven to eighteen would be playing hide and whoop, chicken-mah-chick, hide and seek, and other boisterous games in our yard. (pp. 18–20)

Children were rural Black women's pride and joy. How they were treated and trained not only mattered, but their development was viewed by women as an extension of their self-empowerment. They were their mothers' artistic expression in motion—behaving, looking, and

[19] See Myres, 1982.

presenting themselves as manifestations of a life hoped for and dreamed of to a particular order, similar to how a painter strokes a canvas, trying to make life speak, while hoping that meaning is derived from movement, expression, and every simple form of being.

Womanhood: The Aesthetic of Rural Economic Performance

Womanhood was a system of beliefs, based in a philosophy and practice that held that rural Black women's economic contributions were needed, were valuable, and had transformative powers. Rural Black women used their capacity to earn money for their families to respond to the reality that the Black race was being treated as disposable—persons easily killed and disregarded as human beings. To address blatant acts of violence against Black people, some rural Black women acceptable over-burdensome and overwhelming work responsibilities in fields or homes and for some, in both kinds of spaces.

In rural southern culture, illustrations of motherhood and fatherhood included representations that showed how Black families struggles against extinction and elimination. While documented sources in many different forms reveal fights against debt, murder, false charges, abuse of Black children, they also reveal Blacks working sun up to sun down, striking against unfair labor conditions, buying land, starting business, and using their money collectively to educate and care for their children. As economic contributors, women assisted their families in two important ways: through their work, they saved their families unnecessary expenses and through their makeshift businesses, they added to the families' income (Frances Walker, interview with the author, April 28, 1988; Bernice Jones, interview with the author, August 18, 1989; Hattie Phillip, interview with the author, April 28, 1988). [20] The wage-earning jobs some

[20] Other commercial seamstresses in Brooks Farm included Jessie Scott, Hattie Philip, and Rebecca Collins. During catastrophes, or when taxes were due on the property, some rural Black women styled

southern rural Black women performed revealed how their ethic of care and their art of expression created a work aesthetic that valued their social and economic capital as having less to do with how much money they earned or saved for their families and more to do with their ability to use money to increase their families' value and self-worth. This manner of thinking encouraged families to keep emphasis on the perpetuation and not the extermination of Black people. This kind of mindset was one of the many ways that some rural Black women tied their motherhood to their womanhood, thereby creating a womanist kind of identity that fostered empowerment through a laboring aesthetic with a creative imagination regarding work.

Working the fields was the primary means by which some rural Black women contributed earnings to their families. Brooks Farm women, as well as other Black women of landowning families and those living on plantations throughout the South, worked in the fields, planting, plowing, and harvesting crops. Some also ran farm errands, purchased farm supplies and equipment, kept the books, supervised family and hired labor, prepared meals for workers in order to reduce the amount of wages paid to farmhands, and raised gardens and animals for consumption. Other independent rural Black women marketed produce and sold eggs, butter,

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hair, earning as little as 10 cents per head in 1920 and as much as $5.50 by 1970. Seamstresses, in contrast, charged $3 to $5 to make a suit, $1 for a pair of pants, and 50 cents for a dress, a shirt, or a blouse. Laundresses charged 2 to 3 dollars a week. For $3 a week, a washwoman would go to town, pick up the clothes, wash them, hang them to dry, iron and fold them, and take them back to town to get her pay. Between 1920 and 1950, a family could make $10 to $20 per month by taking in boarders. Because of the seasonality and marginality of farm work, some women and men transferred their energy from their own farm and home to other forms of employment. In the late 1940s, a few women and men in Brooks Farm found work as seasonal domestic and factory laborers. Fieldworkers generally earned $5 per day during the 1950s. As domestic rural workers, some women in Brooks Farm earned from $10 a month in 1920 to $40 a month by 1960. Employment opportunities in factories were not much better, as Black women and men employed by industries established in rural areas between 1950 and 1960 earned from $300 to $350 a year. Between 1940 and 1960, country grocery stores and county schools provided some employment for Black farmwomen. In a country store, a woman working as a butcher and a stacker made as much as $2.50 a day in 1940, $3.50 in 1950, $4 in 1954, and $5 by 1960. Working as cooks, janitors, and teacher's aides during the 1950s, women earned $40, $30, and $35, respectively. During the 1950s and 1960s, all the money earned by Brooks Farm women from their home businesses and their off-farm employment was used to pay bills and to purchase household goods so that the family's farm income could be reinvested in the farm business.

cheese, milk, and vegetables. Some even sold hogs and livestock to help fray family expenses. Field work provided a particular kind of space for the establishment of an economic aesthetic that rural Black women defined and owned as their agency against extinction (Hattie Phillips, interview with the author, April 28, 1988).[21]

In the pre-Civil Rights South before 1970, a considerable number of rural Black women's homes became spaces where economic empowerment was created. Rural Black women in the South used their sewing, laundering, domestics, dressing hair, janitorial work, and storekeeping skills to earn additional income. They made clothes, washed laundry, straightened and curled hair, and operated one-room stores from their homes, selling cookies, cakes, roasted yams, peanuts, and candies. Along with these makeshift businesses, some women continued to earn money as seasonal laborers, chopping and picking cotton. And when opportunities arose to secure off-farm employment in war related agricultural manufacturing industries, they held down some of those jobs (Birdell Vassel, interview with the author, April 27, 1988).[22]

While these efforts were essential to helping rural Black women be creative about ways to respond economically to the threat of extinction and extermination, it is likely that some Black people, including children, did not perceive their aesthetical expressions to be rewarding or successful against feeling of extinction. Some Black writers have indicated that they believed that women's and others' efforts did not make a difference in alleviating the oppression and poverty rural blacks experienced daily. Eventual writers Ann Moody, Richard Wright, and Maya Angelou, for example, viewed their existences and other rural Blacks' realities with disdain. Moody (1968/1992), *In Coming of Age in Mississippi*, argues that agriculture was a form of oppression that Blacks were better off leaving behind. Agriculture failed her family, as it did the

[21] See also M. Walker, 2002; L. Jones, 2002; Sharpless, 1999.
[22] See also Walker & Sharpless, 2006; Ownby, 1999.

family of Richard Wright (1956/1993), a native of rural Mississippi, who wrote of his family's hardship and disappointment with agricultural life in *Black Boy*. Born in 1940, Moody grew up in Mississippi during a time when landowning seemed impossible for Black people and when the second and largest African American migrations to northern urban communities were offering the best chance for Blacks to advance. For Moody, agriculture was a hook that attracted people with the lure of natural abundance and independence, only to require work that wore them out and forced them deeper into hopelessness, powerless in debt that impeded nearly every form of advancement.[23]

Writing about rural culture and the difficulties families experienced eking out a living, Maya Angelou (1969/2009), in *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, claimed that agrarian traditions seemed always to impede Black advancement. Her grandmother, in Stamps, Arkansas, owned a store, where she learned to appreciate the sounds and friendliness of its front culture. But like Anne Moody, she despised what debt and fieldwork did to farming people, especially Black women. She recalled family and friends leaving the store in joyous, playful moods in the morning, only to return home in the evening with looks of hopelessness created by physical labor. Despite their hard work, it appeared to Angelou that families would always be indebted to her grandmother and the merchants at the local commissaries in town.[24]

Margaret Hagood (1939/2011) in *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman*, wrote extensively about the lives of southern farm women, especially White women's encounters and experiences. Published in the 1930s, her findings are also applicable for understanding harsh and oppressive conditions under which most rural Black women continued to labor after the 1930s. Noting particularly their service to family and the ever-increasing tasks

[23] Wright, 1945/1993, pp. 8–9, 40–41; Moody, 1968/1992, p. 80.
[24] Angelou, 1969/2009, p. 7.

for which they were responsible, Hagood, as noted by Stewart E. Tolnay (1999), indicated that southern rural Black farm women's lives were shaped by forces that transcended the individual, as well as by influences that were far beyond their control, making it possible for them to utilize and express artistic imaginations to empower themselves. The South's racial and social climates, combined with the burdens of exhausting cotton cultures, simply, in the words of the now deceased rhythm-and-blues singing genius, Marvin Gaye, made Black women "want to holler." Thus, their economic performances and artistic expressions and creations were critical to their establishment of self-defined identities as womanist laborers, as they [re]presented themselves to themselves in positive ways to continue performing roles that gained for them love and respect for their aesthetic of cultural expression during times when they and their families were suffering "from the consequences of poor cash-crop economies, extreme social impoverishment because of unequal distribution of institutional services, and the brunt-force trauma of regional traditions whose exploitative nature were complicated by religion, patriarchy, and an aristocracy, that, when operating as a collective, subjected rural black people to various forms of discrimination" (Hagood, 1939/2011, p. 4).[25]

Sisterhood: The Aesthetic of Emotional Engagement

Sisterhood was a concept that rural Black women implemented in physical ways. The practice of sisterhood consisted of methods comprised of many interdependent parts that were designed to achieve advancement and empowerment through self-defined collective objectives. In some southern communities, a rural Black womanist sisterhood comprised an interconnected internal mental and spiritual space that women created among and between themselves to provide their group with emotional support. Sisterhood evolved from the idea that women

[25] See also Tolnay, 1999, pp. 36, 1–48, 96–119.

needed to be encouraged by women, have their minds renewed through sisterly relationships, and have their spirits nourished through open female dialogue. These acts of engagement were expected to replenish women and generate habits of generosity. Rural Black women called much of their sisterhood efforts their "missionary work." This included giving service to each other during moments of high stress and emergencies, during times when families needed social uplift and relief, and when help was needed to produce crops, foods, and household items.

Being sisterly during times when emotional grief often burdened families, the sisterhood (a group of women working together like sisters to achieve common objectives) provided assistance during bereavement, illness, and childbirth. To care for the sick, especially in each other's families, some rural Black women organized their schedules and rotated them to provide timely services. On weekends, women generally stayed at the homes of those who were very ill and nursed them. While some women tended the sick, others took care of their homes, livestock, gardens, and fields (Bernice Jones, interview with the author, April 29, 1988).[26] Still others shopped, bought groceries, cooked, and washed and ironed clothes. Women and children supplied the elderly and sick with an adequate supply of fresh water, food, and firewood. And when elderly women and men became widowed, women, with men's help, made funeral and burial arrangements, provisions for food and supported the general welfare and upkeep of families who had lost a breadwinner (Canary Coleman, interview with the author, March 5, 1990).[27] All of this work functioned as a form of resistance to extinction. As long as rural Black women believed that these kinds of acts helped to address feelings of extermination—emotions that made some Blacks feel hopeless and believe that violence was going to end the race—they seemed determined to provide human services as a way to persist with their philosophy and

[26] See also Sterling, 2013.
[27] For a discussion of evolving women's values concerning their work and beliefs, see Singal, 1982.

aesthetic of continuum.

Rural Black women's concept of sisterhood operated at optimal proportion during childbirth. During this time, women visited and offered support, often assisting the midwife in delivering the baby. Acting as sisters, women talked with the pregnant mother during the birth and prayed together when the delivery was difficult. After the baby was born, they provided for the new mother's household by cooking and feeding her family. Sometimes, they took the youngest children home with them to ease the family's burden for a while. Because they believed that a new mother should rest, groups of supportive women ironed, washed, cleaned, and helped the husband with the additional responsibilities incurred during the early weeks of the new baby's life (Lillian Cox, interview with the author, May 2, 1988).[28]

Outside of homes and fields, rural Black women utilized their artistic and organizational skills to help families make broader connections within the community. Feeling strongly about the need to establish extended familial and kinship relations, women organized dances, picnics, parties, and community dinners. These social functions were held at churches, in backyards and barnyards, along riverbanks, and in homes. There were opportunities for the genders to mix, even though men and women found their separate spaces and formed circles so they could carry on gender-specific conversations. But it was the evening dances—a space that became readily available for those men and women who wanted the chance to engage in emotionally fulfilling conversations that sometimes led to dating and a future spouse—that provided the best opportunity for this kind of engagement outside of house visits and other social functions (Maxine Johnson, interview with the author, January 5, 1990; Willie E. McWilliams, interview

[28] For a discussion of the concept of Black sisterhood, see also White, 1999; Giddings, 1984; Gilmore, 1996.

with the author, June 10, 1989).[29]

Extension work, in which many southern rural Black women engaged from the post-World War I era forward, proved to have been the greatest space to build intimacy among women and with children in their communities. In rural communities and in such segregated states as South Carolina, the aesthetics of Black women's material production was on display primarily through their home-demonstration work. Great celebrations were had over their participation in the creation of beautiful homemade quilts, potholders, handkerchiefs, floor mats, clothes, and hats. These products were creatively designed and adorned with knots in quilts, bands around hats, mats made with special stitching and weaving, and clothes manufactured from homemade patterns cut from newspapers and sewn from used fabric, old cotton sacks, and burlap bags. Because extension work was geared toward home improvement, it was another way southern rural Black women nurtured and gave support to improve community life and families' standard of living (Ella Hearon, interview with the author, July 5, 1990).

Being emotionally engaged as sisters was not simply a practice where rural Black women lifted each other's spirits and engaged in activities that only nourished their families and children. An aesthetic of emotional engagement meant that they kept their fingers on the heart beats and feelings of the community. Operating within the context that "community" was also human, some rural Black women established practices that provided continuous moments for healing. This aspect of their sisterhood's aesthetic was manifested through their establishment of community clubs and their representations of works that emanated from social and cultural spaces that evolved within the walls of the Brooks Farm women's club, men's club, and children's club. Together, engagement in club activities was an opportunity for families and children to partake in the freedom of ideas and artistic expressions that helped them resist

[29] See Daniel, 1996, 2000; Kirby, 1986.

feelings of alienation and extinction.

In keeping with this kind of thinking, material arts production proliferated. Men, women, and children collected raw materials, such as sticks and rocks, and women make them into beautiful wall hangings, table decorations, and wind chimes. In addition, they encouraged men to use their skills as welders and workers of iron to create the more substantive material arts. Desiring to adorn homes and porches with their vision of art, some rural Black women encouraged their husbands to make from iron such items as bells, stature of animals, and flower pots, and garden ornaments. From wood, some men carved images of people and families and of such rural structures as barns, houses, and churches. The meaning that was attached to each form of their visual and material art was meant to help all see beyond their present material and social conditions (Leroy Vassel, interview with the author, May 23, 1988).

Material arts production for children revealed other ways that rural Black women's sisterhood engaged their community. Some women encouraged families to support their ideas of recreational arts. Parents helped boys and girls chisel rocks to make marbles, which children utilized in a variety of sporting activities. Together with their parents, children made chips for checkers and checker boards from wood. Ropes were created from twine and children help to create sachets and school bags from animal hides, cotton sacks, and worn out fabric from clothes. Added to these collections were such toys as stuffed animals, dolls and doll clothes, spinning tops, animals, wooden soldiers, kites, fishing poles and bobbers, farm implements carved of wood and iron, wagons, canoes, and, later, cars family members made for children to help them appreciate artistic skills and to celebrate life and their culture. Each of these items bore a special design, a mark that families placed on their art work to differentiate their creative products from others. Throughout the rural South, children and adults collected and preserved these artifacts

(Margaret McLemore, interview with the author, May 20, 1990). Even beautiful leaves and flowers were pressed. Butterflies, rocks, and marbles were preserved in jars; all were displayed at local church functions through community carnivals, fairs, and festivals (Margaret McLemore, interview with the author, May 20, 1990).[30]

Creating an aesthetic in which every member of the community could participate in social and emotional uplift, a functioning sisterhood among rural Black women invested energies into shows and competitions for female empowerment. For instance, the women of the brooks farm women's club organized events at houses and churches, where community members viewed, judged, and voted on the most beautiful quilts, clothes, and canned goods. The club awarded prizes to women who canned the most produce, fashioned the best outfits, and sewed the most creative quilt. The club also awarded prizes for the best-kept house and the most decorated grounds, on the basis of how well manicured and beautified was the yard, the outhouse, and the washing of the house. In addition, awards went to whoever raised the healthiest and most beautiful farm animals (Caleb Knighten, interview with the author, December 27, 1989).

One of the reasons some rural Black women engaged in a form of sisterhood was to create a space where they would have voice and expression without judgment of the larger society. While desiring to be seen also as mothers, sisters, womanists, workers, and nurturers, they wanted to be viewed as persons—individuals who valued the oral and performance traditions of rural Black people. Toward this end, southern rural Black women organized marching bands, painting and drawing contests, drama and theatrical competitions, public-speaking and oral-reading renditions, poetry-speaking contests, and step-and-dance competitions so adults and children would have a space to represent their cultural thinking and feeling about

[30] See also Harris, 2008; Reid, 2007.

blackness. According to Edna Scott, who was born and raised in rural Mississippi, these activities instilled pride among people who recognized the direct relationships between the development of a strong self-defined identity, the evolution of positive self-esteem, and progressive community empowerment (Interview with the author, July 7, 1989).[31]

The approach that southern rural Black women used to conduct their community work serves as a model for understanding how they used artistic expressions to help resist rhetoric concerning the extermination of Black people. To be involved in this kind of work, they played multiple roles—as women, mothers, and sisters—illustrating to the Black oppressed how emotionally demanding work could be integrated into private and public spaces to empower families to encourage an appreciation of themselves, as they struggled to coexist peacefully in a region where cotton was white gold and king of all crops. According to Richard Wright (1941/1969), cotton in black people's lives worked as a drug, a pill to kill the pain of hunger (p. 59). Recognizing Blacks' spirit of triumph in the face of persistent despair, Wright, in *12 Million Black Voices,* celebrated the communal strength of rural black people and their willingness to work together to identify their needs with those of the larger group of blacks. In *12 Million Black Voices*, he wrote:

> What we have not dared feel in the presence of the Lords of the Land, we now feel in church. Our hearts and bodies reciprocally acting upon each other, swing out into the meaning of the story the preacher is unfolding…. We hold somewhere within our hearts a possibility of inexhaustible happiness…. We take this feeling with us each day and it drains the gall out of our years. (pp. 68, 73)

Rural Black women felt this spirit and used it to express their appreciation of themselves aesthetically in every area of their life. In their homes and on the ground in their communities, rural Black women pursued the "possibility of inexhaustible happiness" not only through food cultures and clothes production, but also through the home accessories they created and

[31] Johnson & Green, 1975.

displayed in the form of handmade curtains, wreaths on doors, wallpaper pasted from newspapers to decorate their home's interior, and images cut from magazines to serve as art alongside framed family photographs that hung on walls (Birdell Vassel, interview with the author, April 27, 1988).

Their tin cans and glass jar and bottle collections made shacks into homes and created the aura that even poorly constructed dwelling places, with dirt floors, leaky roofs, and airy walls, had art and culture. Yet it was in their kitchens, gardens, and on their clotheslines where we find southern rural Black women's greatest and most visual art and material forms, where daily expressions symbolized how they transgressed and transformed spaces that for them had been diminished by poverty and racial and gender oppression. Their collections and preservations involved not only the gathering of things, but also the passing forward of traditions that helped maintain and develop hearty spirits that became filled with hope and faith.

Rural Black Womanist Spiritual Aesthetic and Visual Creative Expressions

As presented in this examination, it appears that aspects of a rural Black womanist aesthetic were concerned with spirituality and the manner in which some women practiced their belief about joy, peace, and kindness by helping rural Black children and families understand the value of having spiritual strength and also of seeing the possibility of life beyond the exterminating ideas some members of the White society perpetrated against Black people. For some rural Black women, it was important that they continued to connect the spiritual with the visual to establish symbolic paths—believing in metaphysical existences that enabled some rural black people to envision themselves living life in opposition to extinction. Some rural Black women expressed this path of continuum by engaging in three self-defined spiritual-visual

aesthetics: identity, provision, and pride. Interviews with rural black women of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, for example, revealed that this aesthetic was distinguishable in their kitchens and gardens and at their clotheslines. The kitchen was the usual meeting place in the home, where particular identities and forms of restorations were forged. What was prepared in the kitchen, and how it was kept, shaped how some women defined and carved out an individual identity around food.

A woman was known for her kitchen. Her identity as a good homemaker and household manager was tied to the types of appliances—including sink, dishpan, stove, and icebox—that she chose and subsequently decorated, as well as the design of her pie cabinet, plates, utensils, and cookware. The kinds of chairs or table coverings she most often made, though sometimes bought, became part of her identity. Living in little more than shacks, most women kept their kitchen clean and certain food dishes identified them. Some were known as the best pie or cake maker, others were the best butter or milk producer, still others were identified by their greens, the way they fired okra or corn, made cornbread, or chitlins. Nearly every woman's identity as a homemaker was associated with her fried chicken and fried fish. According to Birdell Vassel, women, when valued for their artistic preparation and presentation of food, improved their perceptions of themselves not because someone labeled them as good cooks, but because they had used food to define themselves (Interview with the author, April 27, 1988).[32]

How the food was prepared and served gave it artistic meaning. Nearly every table had a cloth, sometimes passed down and most often made from old fabric and pieced together as if it were a special tablecloth that was given life from the configuration of such symbols as squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles sewn together with hand stitches. On the tablecloth was placed wildflowers, which girls usually picked, and homemade table mats, often made from straw.

[32] See also A. Walker, 1983.

When food arrived at the table, it was most often carried in special bowls, some made from wood and clay, others made from tin and aluminum. Glasses were converted from fruit jars and often the plates were painted aluminum pans or wooden rounded surfaces with carved etchings. "These were the good tablewares," recalled Minnie Brown, "and our parents pulled these out most of the times when somebody stopped by to eat a little, when folk was fixin' dinner for the preacher" (Interview with the author, June 5, 1989). "The best you had was placed on the table, so everybody could feel good 'bout being in the mix, sharing a meal together," Estella Thomas remembered (Interview with the author, April 28, 1989).

For children, food preparation and mealtimes allowed for another creation of cultural and emotional engagement. This was a time for storytelling. The remembrance of great moments in the lives of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—who often had only recipes, food stories, and names to pass on to their children as their inheritance and a form of property that positioned them among persons connected to history and legacy. Traditional southern dishes such as greens, ham hocks, and hot-water cornbread, chicken-feet soup, chitlins, roasted sweet potatoes and sweet potato pie, okra, fried, steamed, boiled and in gumbo soups of all types, chicken, and the making of hoghead cheese (sometimes called souse) all had great familial stories and connection to African American history. But it was how these stories were passed down that signified their movement as an artform: they were presented in clear, loud, and visual language, which painted pictures of genius, of how people mostly took very little to nothing and made it an expression of much. Most of the stories explained the art of preparation so that children would not see that they were eating the poorest cuts of meat, the cheapest forms of vegetables, and primarily wild fruits and greens. Instead, it was hoped that children would understand how to create value among the least-valued people and those living under the most

unpleasant social conditions and circumstances (Eva Glenn, interview with author, April 28, 1989).

The storyteller told of the rituals of why and how the batter used to fry chicken and fish was made from secretly developed ingredients, usually couched in hidden language and spoken quietly so that the product would not be stolen by Whites and/or other Blacks. These moments were really concerned with establishing inheritance—a view that children could hear and see and realize their parents and grandparents owned something, as White people did, and had control over some aspect of their life. The art lay in the telling of the story about beautiful foods and their preparation and the positive images that children could see on those invisible canvases (J. C. Turner, interview with the author, June 15, 1989).

The significance of food-ways concerned more than building and maintaining bodily strength and strong community concepts: it involved establishing a powerful message from within, among nuclear and extended family, a message that helped individuals understand that they could move in and out of public and private spaces among rural Black people and revive their mind, body, and spirit where connections to the present and reconnections to the past were created (Fannie Turner, interview with the author, June 14, 1989).[33] Through food, southern rural Black women met one of the highest needs of the human condition: restoration. It was in the kitchen that family, friends, and neighbors were restored to a place of importance; it was where folks were made to feel like they were somebody.

Showing love was an important component of the rural Black womanist aesthetic. Women believed that the unconditional love they received from their families strengthened them to provide and give nurture even when their bodies were weary and worn. While the kitchen was the private sphere, the garden was the public space where some women illustrated this aspect of

[33] See also Hendrix, 1962; Allen, 1931.

their motherhood—an application of a womanist kind of love that they provisionally used garden space to regenerate life and replenish the spirit. As with the kitchen, women primarily controlled the garden and managed its production. A woman's value was associated with not only the size of her garden, but also with the amount of time she gave to producing the greatest variety and quantity of produce. The more produce in the garden, the more a woman's value as a provider increased (Francis Walker, interview with the author, April 28, 1988).[34]

The garden represented the heart of rural Black womanist artistic aesthetics. It allowed women to internalize food production in spiritual ways, primarily as a form of covering and as a covenant space, where women were responsible for replenishing those in need. By raising a garden, a woman placed herself in a covenant relationship with the body of her family, committing their health to her fingertips and making her hands a part of their healing process. The kind of energy women put into producing fresh fruits and vegetables was viewed as an illustration of how much she loved providing for those who depended on her. The garden was their way of living out that aspect of their culture of womanhood that emphasized regeneration. A Black womanist perspective expected women to regenerate, to revive dead places within themselves first and then within all others whose lives needed replenishing (Carrie Gordon, interview with the author, March 15, 1987).[35]

The clothesline was the public, expressive, artistic dimension of womanism in southern rural Black communities. In rural enclaves, the responsibilities of laundering became an opportunity women took to create for themselves their own proud room, a physical space where they publicly established a cultural aesthetic of meaning. Before 1950, most rural women grew up washing clothes on a rub board and in a tub. The booming rural economies during and after

[34] For a comparison of women's work and culture, see Maquire, 1975.
[35] See also A. Walker, 1983; Friedman, 1990.

World War II made it possible for many families to purchase a washing machine. Although it had to be filled with water, the electric machine had a wringer that squeezed the water from the clothes. But the majority of the families had no machines to dry their clothes until the 1970s. Until then, clothes were dried outside, giving southern rural Black women the space to remove the stigma of being unkempt, dirty, and lacking in moral understanding (Beatrice Collins, interview with the author, April 29, 1989). Clotheslines within this context had less to do with the utilitarian purposes of laundry and more with creating a space for psychological relief and connecting spiritually with the past to build cultural meaning in the present. It was in the prideful hanging of clothes that women found an opportunity to illustrate one of their truest expressions: love; and to establish their own brand of politics: respectability. Pride was the life of this particular cultural aesthetic. Biblical scripture admonishes pride or being proud, and the rural churches cautioned against holding a negative prideful spirit. But there was room for individuals to possess a healthy spirit of pride. Rural Black women, often poor and broken by oppression and injustice, made their clotheslines their pride and joy.[36]

A clothesline most likely consisted of a smooth wire or rope strung between two poles that were mounted in the ground to give the line stability. The line usually hung in the back or to the side of the house and at a distance, so the clothes could get plenty of freshening sunshine and air. For large families, with 5 or more children, washing was usually done daily, in either the early morning or the early evening. Only work and school clothes were washed during the week and linens and towels on the weekend.

How a woman hung her clothes and the way in which she arranged them on the line determined how much pride she took in demonstrating this aspect of her womanism, for the culture of rural Black womanhood gave women the space to exercise autonomy artistically and

[36] See Washington, 1972.

expressively. The white and bright colored clothes were washed first, followed by the dark. How the white clothes looked mattered, because this was where the evidence of love, care, and respect for the family became most visible to nonfamily eyes. Priding themselves on how white the diapers, underwear, towels, and kitchen and bed linens were, southern rural Black women arranged clothes on the line in a way that communicated something about the value they placed on people and things. As Freddie Wiley remembered, baby diapers and clothes were hung first, signaling this was the most important member of the family; the baby represented hope, a sign of a generation to come and with his or her maturity, the chance for change. Each new baby was a greater investment in the improvement of family life (Interview with the author, June 16, 1990). Then next on the clothesline came children's T-shirts, underwear, and church and school clothes. The adults' undergarments followed with everybody's work clothes and socks finishing out the clothesline.

The hanging of the sheets and towels completed the clothesline ritual and expression. As part of their cultural aesthetic, rural Black women in the South used these items to lift and cover their community and family by symbolizing a type of spiritual cleanliness that removed every form of stain, especially the negativity that evolved from memories they had of being assaulted by racialized language and epithets as well as of the physical and emotional abuse they recalled some Whites, through lynchings, beatings, killings, and rapes perpetrated against Blacks for centuries. The Reverend Fox McCann suggested that towels and sheets were assembled and hung, large to small, to encourage the erasure of hard feelings, signaling to the family members and passersby that offenses through acts of forgiveness become smaller over space and time and that, when forgiven, they become the smallest incident in lifecycles (Interview with the author, May 1, 1989).

This message of the towels had to be repeated to save Black people's lives, for both the elderly and the young knew all too well that any retaliation against Whites meant automatic death. So the towels, as Ella Hearon recalled, "Represented lettin' the dirt go from your spirit, mind, and body, so you could live" (Interview with the author, July 5, 1990). This, too, was the meaning of the sheets—that through forgiveness and unconditional love, abuse could be pressed back to achieve the inner peace needed to stand against any form of aggression. Thus, towels and sheets were arranged in particular orders to inspire the love that Black people in the South needed to strengthen their resolve to reject the idea that others had a right to treat them violently and decide who would lie on or between their sheets. When rural Black women finished hanging all the clothes between the towels and sheets, they had done the most significant spiritual work of the day: they had covered their family members, providing a space for themselves and every member of the community to feel transformed. And it did not bother them that even this priceless artistic expression hung on clotheslines behind run-down shacks (Margaret Ball, interview with author, May 2, 1989).

Feeling no illusions about the message and meaning of this expression, southern rural Black women were careful about the method they used to present their clotheslines in public. For them, spacing and landscaping mattered, indicating that although rooms in the shacks were at times cramped, sometimes, like the mind and spirit, the exterior environment and the landscape, both similar to the external self, were not and did not have to be. As Irene Scott explained, clothes were spaced just so, with enough distance to allow fresh air to permeate each piece of fabric, allowing every thread, like each member of a family, space to breathe and be "kissed by a ray of sun" (Interview with the author, April 28, 1987).

On the clothesline, women used clothespins they themselves made. These devices

symbolized important connectors, indicating people are joined by a body of ideas and by performing services that held each other together. Clothespins were artifacts that symbolized that survival lies in being connected, bridging the big with the small and the colors with the whites for the common good to prevail. Sometimes, they were two small sticks tightly knotted together with yarn and slid over the folded pieces of clothing to keep them in place. Carrie Gordon recalled that some women used a unique knot, looped to fix towels, socks, diapers, and undergarments to the clothesline (Interview with the author, March 15, 1987).

Appreciating and rearranging the earth in a nonfarm-production manner, southern rural Black women presented the essence of Black people's beauty to Black folk through the landscaping they placed around their clotheslines. As pointed out by Freddie Wiley, they told family members and neighbors that God was using their clotheslines and landscape expressions to illustrate how he desired to prune them, heal the community of bitterness and strife, while making them ready to manifest the diversity of his genius. Many southern rural Black women demonstrated this by caring for the earth in ways that supported their belief that it was only God who was in control: he alone gave increase to the earth and rest for those who were heavily laden. Resting, some women planted flowers around the poles of their clothesline; others painted their poles with faces, smiles, and flowers. Still others placed a bench or an old wooden chair at the end of the line, where they sat and folded clothes while carrying on conversations with neighbors or children, and some relaxed to indicate that rest was needed, expected, and was going to be acknowledged and taken. Manicured lawns around the clothesline found a place in the women's expression, as they removed weeds and tall grasses that distracted from the portrait they were daily unveiling. The images they projected worked to transcend obvious poverty and helped them feel empowered by performing tasks that allowed them to define their own

womanhood. The clothesline symbolized a transformation wherein women celebrated art and culture expressed through self-defined expressions (Freddie Wiley, interview with the author, June 16, 1990).

Jacqueline Jones (2010) has noted in *Labor of Love, Labor Sorrow* that Black men and women, together, participated in a rural folk culture based on group cooperation, rather than competition and the accumulation of goods. The way in which this culture both resembled and diverged from that of poor Whites in the South helps illuminate the interaction between classes and racial factors in shaping the role of women. The experiences of southern rural Black women show how, through racial and group affiliation and cultural reproduction, rural Black communities sought to achieve self-determination within a limited sphere. In this way, southern rural Black people insulated themselves from White outsiders and from the disappointments that often accompanied individual self-seeking and self-making identities (J. Jones, 2010, p. 100).

It is no question that southern rural Black women relied on one another not only in the contexts mentioned above, but also according to manners in which they celebrated each other's successes. Sometimes, this involved shared joy over the wedding of sister-friends, ministering to the sick and elderly, and the promotion of children from one grade to the next at the close of the school term. Women had their own gender-based activities, as well as clubs that contributed to the general good of the community. Kitchen meetings and quilting parties brought young and old women together for times when they shared and built each other's confidence, as they chatted, feasted, and affirmed their womanness in a culture of hatred of blackness, in general, and of Black women, in particular.

Rural Black women's determination to survive remained connected to their strong sense of spirituality. They found solace within their religious institutions and worship services. At

monthly meetings, they met to affirm their unique spiritual heritage, to seek comfort, and to support one another. Together, they found in each other a "psychological center," a supportive emotional space, that helped them coped with daily oppression. Faith in each other created a private world inside the self, sustained by artistic visions and imaginations and by visual and oral expressions. For their womanism to make sense, and for their aesthetics to serve as a liberating force, they found ways to empower themselves. Their kitchens, their gardens, and their clotheslines functioned as metaphors of their virtues, a signs of their empathy, passion, provision, and creativity (J. Jones, 2010, p. 100).

In the end, there can be no doubt that southern rural Black women's aesthetics became the impetus for their fight for greater inclusion and access to equality and opportunity and it eventually strengthened their hands as creators of themselves. Onnie Lee Logan (1999) in her autobiography, *Motherwit: An Alabama Midwife's Story* (as told to Katherine Clark), described an aspect of her philosophy that is befitting of nearly every rural Black woman who has had to help rural people survive. In her articulation, Logan explained that she had served her community out of a sense of pride in her own skill, respect for a tradition handed down to her, and a need she saw in the community. Logan's connection to her community and her sense of the necessity of service was derived from seeing how her parents shared food with other African Americans in their home.[37] She learned early that a rural Black aesthetic had to include helping people and not expecting them always to ask or bow down when they were in need, especially when there were vegetables, flour, meat, and other produce and goods to spare: "Love, care, and share, that's what we did" (Logan, 1999, p. 6). Alice Walker (1983) wrote that her mother's greatest form of creativity was in gardening. It was not in farming, which involved working for someone else; instead, it consisted of creating huge and glorious flowers that were valued by

[37] See Ownby, 2003.

others, who, with a spirit of appreciation and understanding, turned Walker's art into a group creation (pp. 231–243).

"'Just One Kind' of Aesthetic…" is an effort to portray nuanced ways in which rural Black women confronted their daily, physical, material, social, cultural, and economic circumstances. It, too, is a portrayal concerning how some rural Black people responded to ideas regarding empowering themselves as a people to move forward rather than as a race fixated on practices they believed were intended to produce fear and make them think there was a road to extinction. The descriptions and analyses herein are portraits of a people and of how rural Black women, through concepts of motherhood, womanhood, and sisterhood, used notions of aesthetics (the beauty of ones' own voice, art, and expressions) to espouse beliefs in self-determination above feelings of extermination. While some in society may call these efforts acts of drudgeries, some rural Black women internalized them as the art of life.

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