Chapter 6

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and the Expansive Cycle of Mothering while Black

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Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Mother" begins to shade an understanding of why the context of mothering is of equal merit with discussions about the process of mothering in children's and young adult literature depicting African Americans. He writes:

Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers 
Impel you forever up the great stairs—
For I will be with you till no white brother 
Dares keep down the children of the Negro Mother.

While white Western culture stresses individual autonomy and focuses on the nuclear family as the most significant site of mothering activity, Hughes's invocation of a mother who transcends such autonomy and specificity emphasizes the interconnectedness of the black community, bound together by a systemic oppression that conditions the experience of mothering in specific ways. Hughes's "Negro Mother" crosses generations and works within social structures that decenter her own individual experience with her children; she mothers her children in the contexts of a fraught history and a present that continues to be dangerous, as evidenced by the tolling bell of names that are burned into our public conscience: Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray... to say nothing of the countless murdered black children...
whose names don't make it into the national headlines. In this chapter, we will be exploring those contexts as they appear in a set of texts that follow similar patterns of what it means to mother while black across different genres: Eloise Greenfield's three-generation memoir, *Childtimes*; Jacqueline Woodson's picture book, *Show Way*; Marilyn Nelson's heroic crown of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*; Angela Johnson's multivoiced young adult novel, *Toning the Sweep*; and Renée Watson's young adult novel, *This Side of Home*. Our approach to these texts is through cultural-historical activity theory (hereafter referred to as CHAT), a methodology that challenges the notion of individual autonomy and instead focuses on the interrelated contexts within which human activity takes place and acquires meaning and significance.

CHAT was initiated in the 1920s and 30s by a group of Russian psychologists led by Lev Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev, and A. R. Luria as a response to their dissatisfaction with existing paradigms for how a person develops; in fact, they were commissioned by the post-1917 Soviet government to develop an approach to psychology incorporating Marxist principles that situated the individual within the larger collective. Both behaviorism and certain strains of psychology and psychoanalysis posit the individual as the hub of a wheel of ever-widening contexts, such as the family, society, and culture, to which he or she reacts in a pattern of stimulus and response according to inborn tendencies and capacities; these paradigms grant that a child is influenced by his contexts, and may even go so far as to say she is shaped or constructed by them, but they still conceive of both the individual and the contexts as static objects or entities that we approach largely through contemplation. CHAT challenges that basic assumption, emphasizing that an individual is not simply an autonomous agent reacting to outside forces. Instead, our development of a sense of self begins in activities that take place between our mothers and ourselves; a child's psyche appears interpsychologically before it appears intrapsychologically. Our use of adverbs here is intentional, as the psyche itself must be understood as an activity rather than an entity. Furthermore, the psyche as an activity is always in negotiation with wider systems of cultural rules, signs, distributed labor, communities, and tools. This is a profoundly different way of thinking about consciousness; it removes consciousness as the inborn center of human experience and does not replace it. Rather, it proposes an open structure of activity circulating among various culturally mediated elements and suggests that human consciousness is constantly emerging in and through the activities in which we partake. As Paul Prior explains,
Soonie, but she is a reference point for a great-grandmother who, sold at
unusual to have a multivoiced narrative in young adult literature, the other
eight generations of mothers in her family. The first named character is
teen-year-old Emmie’s mother and grandmother. While it is certainly not

Jacqueline Woodson similarly traces a lineage through
Show Way,
of including first-person, contemplative stories from four­
Toning the Sweep
along the lineage that began so long ago.

Greenfield continues, “This is a book about family. Kinsfolk touching across
the centuries, walking with one hand clasping the hands of those who have gone
before, the other hand reaching back for those who will come after.” This same
sentiment is depicted through both text and pictures in Woodson’s Show
Way, and through the unusual narrative technique in Angela Johnson’s
Toning the Sweep of including first-person, contemplative stories from four­
teen-year-old Emmie’s mother and grandmother. While it is certainly not
usual to have a multivoiced narrative in young adult literature, the other
voices are most often those of peers. Emmie and her mother, Diane, are visiting Grandmama Ola’s home in the desert for a final time before moving Ola to Cleveland, where she will live with them until she dies of cancer. As Emmie videotapes scenes from Ola’s beloved home and the friends she will leave behind, her mother reflects on the differences between the way she views the house and the way Emmie views it. Ola had whisked Diane away from Alabama after her husband, Diane’s father, was killed by white men angry over his new car, not leaving her time to grieve her father’s death. Diane left her mother as soon as she was old enough. Ola’s narrative focuses on how she felt when she found out that her daughter had given birth to a daughter, and how she will need Emmie’s courage to strengthen her for the days ahead. Emmie, on the other hand, has only positive memories of the desert, but she knows that both Ola and her mother need a ceremony to mark the loss of husband and father, so she calls on a tradition from the past to mark his passing, drumming on a plow to create a sound called “tining the sweep.”

Each of these books thus focuses explicitly on the interconnections between culture, history, and activity as contexts for their intergenerational reflections on mothering. They each describe how mothering happened within one African American family, and the social and cultural conditions that changed what mothering meant from one generation to the next. The protagonists keep at the center of their life stories the “problem” of being black in a country that uses both institutionalized and ideological mechanisms of oppression. In James Baldwin’s words, “to be born black in America is an immediate, a mortal challenge” (129), and this notion is relevant to the narratives told by each of the women. Social class, power, general and individual histories, and other sociocultural elements play key roles within activity systems. As literary works that employ multiple narrators and tell the stories of multiple generations, these texts are exemplary of the “multivoiced formation” of an activity system, a system which expands according to the “reorchestration of those voices, of the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants” (Engeström, “Transformation” 35). Engeström further posits that CHAT is an approach “that can dialectically link the individual and the social structure” (19). Thus, the chorus of voices that appear in these texts, mingled with historical and contemporary iterations of African American mothering, is well served by a CHAT analysis.

Renée Watson’s This Side of Home uses a different approach to reflect the “multivoiced formation” of mothering within an activity system. Her novel appears at first blush to be a relatively traditional, first-person young adult narrative. However, it soon becomes clear that Watson has developed what Bakhtin would call a polyphonic work, one which gives voice to a diversity of opinions about the gentrification of a Portland, Oregon, neighborhood. The narrator, Maya, has a twin, Nikki. They have been named after their mother’s favorite poets, Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni, immediately establishing a connection with their cultural heritage through their mother’s desire. Maya and Nikki, however, are of two minds with regard to the transformation of their neighborhood into a hipster paradise of coffee shops, health-food restaurants, and trendy boutiques; Nikki is well pleased to have a safer neighborhood with cool places to hang out, while Maya is disturbed that the businesses are all owned by white people. Most troubling, however, is that their best friend, Essence, and her mother have been priced out of their home, as their landlord evicted them and sold the place to a white family. Maya is soon in conflict not only with her sister but also within herself, as she finds herself falling for her new white neighbor. How can she be a girl who cares about race and class issues and still be attracted to a white boy? While most young adult texts would have Maya work this out as if her mother were not in the picture, Maya’s mother’s opinion matters to her; throughout the text, she is both role model and conscience for Maya, as Maya reflects on what her mother says and what Maya imagines she would say about Maya’s actions and thoughts. Watson takes great care to individualize her characters while embedding them in communal structures: Maya and Nikki’s mother is a steady, smart community activist, while Essence’s mother is an abusive alcoholic. The mothers are friends, however, and Maya treats Essence’s mother with care and respect, while Essence turns to Maya’s mother for a place to live when her mother once again fails to stay sober.

At the heart of Watson’s text is a model and context for action. Both of Maya’s parents are community activists, and when her new principal implements policies that Maya sees as disempowering, she too takes on that mantle. Her mother, oddly enough, is troubled by this. She has become weary of sharing her husband with the community and wishes for more time for them as a family, reflecting, perhaps, her embeddedness in white communities of value and practice as well as more expansive black ones. She is also fearful of the violence that sometimes attends protests of racial inequality. Maya has to remind her of her own past, when she pressured the city to improve the local park for her girls, but her reluctance to see her daughter engage in activism suggests some of the complexities that underlie Engeström’s model of mediated action (see figure).
Engeström's model of mediated action

As a counter to the direct and overly simplistic stimulus/response model that dominated the psychology of his day, Vygotsky first developed the idea that human activity involves a person working toward a goal through the material and conceptual tools culture and history make available. Engeström later elaborated the model to account for at least six components (tools, subject, object, rules, community, and division of labor) that connect with and influence each other, and together they shape the outcome of the activity system. Additionally, other macrolevel components (production, consumption, distribution, and exchange), which some scholars overlay onto the model, are indicative of its roots in Marxist theories of material production. The intention of blending so-called local factors with broader, distal-level forces is to create a system that is dynamic, rather than static, and to saturate any analysis of individual activity with reflections about sociocultural factors, and vice versa.

Engeström referred to an object as "a project under construction, moving from potential raw material to a meaningful shape and to a result or outcome" ("Transformation" 65). Engeström also noted that once a goal has been satisfied, a new object is then created, which is then accompanied by new actions. We conceive of object as the purpose of, or motivations behind, a subject's actions within an activity system. Eloise shares with her mother and grandmother the same object in Childtimes. Their stated goal for writing is to show "black people struggling, not just to stay alive, but to live, to give of their talents, whether many or few." They use their book to show how, "Through all of their pain and grief, and even their mistakes, black people have kept on going, had some good times, given a lot of love to one another, and never stopped trying to help their children get on board the freedom train." We can infer that Marilyn Nelson had a similar goal in mind when writing A Wreath for Emmett Till. She says, "I was nine years old when Emmett Till was lynched in 1955. His name and history have been a part of most of my life. When I decided to write a poem about lynching for young people, I knew I would write about Emmett Till... I also knew that I would write this poem as a heroic crown of sonnets." Watson's compassionate treatment of characters such as Essence's mom and her complex portrait of Maya indicate a commitment to support young people caught up in the complexities of negotiating life in a society where individual goals are overshadowed by systemic injustice and oppression.

The women, as authors and characters, are also the subject of the text. The term "subject" is defined by V. P. Lektorsky as the bearer of activity and can refer to an animate or inanimate individual entity or collective. Lektorsky argued that a subject has "its own aims, interests, memory, and norms"; it is "the unity of consciousness, the unity of an individual biography, and the center of making decisions" and is therefore inherently situated in cultural and social contexts (81-82). In each of the texts under consideration here, there is an explicit reference to the "aims, interests, memory, and norms" of the women in relation to these contexts. Emmie, for instance, recalls the historical tradition of "toning the sweep"; by evoking this cultural memory, she brings together the consciousness of the women in her life. Maya meets a character who is ubiquitous in African American youth literature, an older man who serves as memory keeper and tells her the history of her neighborhood, and she ends her story by bringing her friends to meet him. Woodson weaves her ancestors into the story of her own past and future. Each of these subjects demonstrates the CHAT ideology that an individual and her contexts are intertwined; in so doing, they work against the white Western model of autonomous individualism in favor of a communitarian ethic.

The community of Childtimes mostly consists of "kinsfolk" or the relatives shown in the "Family Tree" image that precedes part 1 of the book. "Procession" expresses that "we are just three" of the "sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces and cousins" who together form a procession that "stretches long and wide" (Greenfield). A community is defined as a grouping of participants who relate to the same object, perhaps
in different ways. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger theorize that one learns what it means to be a member of a community by apprenticing, or by participating in situated activities in which one learns by doing, rather than by observing. In *This Side of Home*, Tony, the white boy Maya is interested in, at first reluctant to complete an assignment to learn about journalists who suffered to get the truth about racial injustice, because he thought they were all black. Maya realizes that just as it is hard to be always portrayed as a victim, it is also hard to be always cast as an oppressor merely by virtue of your race. She points out that some of the journalists were white, and further reflects that she has more interests in common with Tony than she does with Devin, the black boy that her mother wishes she would date. Tony's interests and commitments bring him and Maya closer to what Lave and Wenger term a "community of practice," referring to "participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (98).

Within the community there exists *division of labor*, which means that each participant of the activity system enacts different roles and responsibilities toward achieving the identified goal. The three women of *Childtimes*, Pattie, Lessie, and Eloise, each take on a part of the book, and each becomes both narrator and protagonist in her own narrative. Eloise writes about chores, which her mama and grandma also have to do. She also writes about the kind of work that men in her family take up, namely, sharecropping, working on the old car, and working odd jobs at stores. Males in Eloise's section of their book are depicted as workers and family providers. Eloise's daddy goes north to "make a way for us," she writes, "looking for safety, for justice, for freedom, for work, looking for a good job" (126–27). Additionally, the storytelling work of the women in *Childtimes*, like that of Woodson in *Show Way*, is complemented by an illustrator. Nelson's work is also illustrated, and the artist, Philippe Lardy, provides a detailed note that describes his process in rendering the poetry's themes through his illustrations. But the labor of all of these works is of course completed by the readers themselves, as they coconstruct meaning from the texts.

Labor is always facilitated by *tools* and carried out according to community *norms* and *rules*. Pattie uses memory as the primary tool for reaching the book's goal. In a direct address to readers, she writes, "Yours is now, you're living your childtime right this minute, but I've to go way, way back to remember mine" (5). *Tools* (or *means*) are both immaterial and physical items, and in some cases *artifacts* (any documents, or items created by a

subject) share a space with *tools* on the activity triangle. In this analysis, one of the most important tools is something we might loosely call genre—that is, even though the texts take different forms, they all share the larger designation of African American literature, which has come, over time, to possess distinctive features and thus creates contexts for its own reproduction, reception, and transformation. Nelson, for instance, adopts a form first developed in the 1930s to transform the ugly tragedy of Emmett Till's death into a legacy of sublime beauty. "The strict form," she writes, "became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter." For all its insulating power, however, the poetry has great affective impact on readers, sensitizing them anew to a horror that is still very much with us.

In each of the different forms of these texts, the generic conventions that we have already discussed—the explicit invocation of historical perspectives, the depiction of multiple generations, the attention to problems of systemic race-based oppression, the inclusion of multiple voices—contextualize the presentation of African American mothers. Insofar as literature itself is a mediating cultural tool, these books put forth an ideology that runs counter to white Western ideals of autonomy and the erasure of history. Considered as one element within a cultural historical activity system, African American literature thus provides a conceptual tool for understanding why the death of a single young man in Florida or Missouri or Cleveland or Baltimore can evoke such an intense and far-reaching response. The tendency of white Western thought structures is to isolate individual subjects within their immediate and specific contexts, divorced from both responsiveness and responsibility to cultural histories of oppression; while historical fiction with white protagonists is common, children's and young adult texts that represent and honor the perspectives of multiple generations within a single narrative are not. African American youth literature, by contrast, more often than not places its subjects within sociocultural activity systems so as to bear witness to the twin themes of W. E. B. DuBois's "double consciousness" and Henry Louis Gates's theory of "signifying."

DuBois posited that black people in American culture necessarily hold two different perspectives of ourselves at once: we view ourselves from our own perspective, and we also view ourselves from a perspective of how white people interpret us—that is, whether a whistle on the sidewalk might be too threatening, whether a hooded sweatshirt worn to shield one's face from a drizzly Florida night might cause one to be perceived as a suspect, and whether a turned-up radio might be enough of an annoyance to elicit...
gunshots. DuBois elucidated, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (5). Thus, embedded within the stories that African Americans narrate is a two-pronged vantage point of interpretation, or—as in Gates's theory—a constant shifting back and forth between one's own blackness and an awareness of the significance of one's blackness in a country dominated by whites. While this shifting awareness threads through all of the texts we are considering, Watson's novel literalizes double consciousness not only through the opposite perspectives of the twins but also through Maya's frequent referrals to what her mother would think of her behavior and attitudes. Several of the sonnets of *A Wreath for Emmett Till* focus on the shifting perspectives Nelson imagines for Emmett's mother as she sought justice and remembrance for her son:

Would you say yes, like the mother of Christ?  
Or would you say no to your destiny,  
mother of a boy martyr, if you could? (lines 12–14)

So this is the context of "The Negro Mother," who can reflect upon triumph as well as tragedy. Her sons and daughters have unique, individual lives that are rich and sufficient unto themselves, yet within their varied stories we can find familiar pathways that have been walked time and time again. These stories then become conceptual tools through which readers can experience empathy and work with greater understanding toward transformation.

**Mothering for Social Change**

Situated as it is within a broader Marxist framework, CHAT also takes into account the faraway forces that influence the protagonists' lives—the distal-level actions of *production, consumption, distribution,* and *exchange.* These four elements are strongly situated in Marx's philosophies put forth in his work *Grundrisse* and are therefore angled toward addressing social structures—especially the possibility of radical social change. The element of *production* is meant to yield change, and multiple thinkers have noted that activity itself results in transformation (Vygotsky; Engeström "Expanding"; Engeström "Transformation"; Roth). In fact, Roth characterized *production* as a "driver of change" (5) within the intricate activity system. By producing and publishing stories and poems that shed light on the activity system of mothering while black, these texts do a kind of mothering work in and of themselves, acting in the role of Woodson's Big Mama and Hughes's "Negro Mother," sharing stories and dreams with all children rather than only the ones to whom they physically gave birth.

Once production occurs, *distribution* is possible. Distribution can be analyzed both within the content of the texts and as the texts themselves circulate among readers. The lives of Eloise, Lessie, and Pattie can be considered to have been *distributed* according to the hand of history. The Great Migration leads Lessie to Norfolk, and Eloise to Washington, D.C., when the family lineage was begun in Bertie County, North Carolina. Economic forces are responsible for this, as the lumber mill that once made Parmele a thriving source of commerce, and which was owned by two white men, eventually closed, creating a void in the local job market. Similarly, the history told to Maya of her Portland neighborhood is one of black migration and struggle for better wages and opportunity that contextualizes and complicates her attitudes toward the gentrification that is currently taking place, where property values and quality of life are seeing gains that are good for some of her black neighbors while pushing others once again to the margins.

Such contradictions between positive and negative social and economic change also operate in *Childtimes,* either within or between activity components. Eloise participates in the Great Migration, which is a signal of both change and resistance within the text. Because her family can no longer sustain itself in Parmele, they seek a different region in which to live. Eloise's father leaves to "make a way" for the family (126), and this shows that his character displays a strong sense of agency. Rather than accepting the family's plight that there is not enough income, he moves the family north. Once in her new home of Washington, D.C., Eloise feels that she "lived in a different place, a different Washington" than the one where the White House is located (145). This feeling is created by segregation, as she further explains: "There were a lot of things we couldn't do and places we couldn't go. Washington was a city for white people. But inside that city was another city. It didn't have a name and it wasn't all in one area, but it was where black people lived" (149). The contradiction here is that although Eloise's family journeys north for better opportunities, Washington presents new challenges that the family didn't face in Parmele. Essence and her mother experience a similar sense of exclusion based on the imbrication of
socioeconomic class and race when they have to leave their home for a section of the city they can afford, one that is predominately black rather than integrated like Maya's gentrified neighborhood.

As Nancy D. Tolson has written, contradictions such as these find their ways into black children's literature through the blues aesthetic, that is, the expression of the pain and suffering of past and present experience through redemptive artistic forms that come in sadness and joy. Pattie Frances Ridley Jones, the first narrator in *Childtimes*, was born in 1884, when "White farmers were angry because they now had to pay black workers." In many areas, black schools and homes were burned, and people were dragged from their homes and murdered. It was hard to stay alive, hard to get jobs, hard to get an education" (Greenfield 3). She transforms these painful memories into richly evocative stories that relate not only pain but also appealing warmth and humor. Pattie's daughter, Lessie, born in 1906, writes about her mother admiringly: "Mama really knew how to tell a story. She could make it sound as if it really happened," and "I liked being near Mama. When she cooked, I would sit in a chair right near the stove" and talk about the day's events (Greenfield 3). Nelson similarly invokes the blues aesthetic in her transformation of Emmett Till's grisly murder into a heroic crown of sonnets. In *Toning the Sweep*, Diane and Ola redeem their painful memories of tragedy and estrangement by telling their stories of mothering Emmie, and she honors their pain by toning the sweep for her grandfather as a way of helping them move into a transformed future.

These invocations of the blues aesthetic in their storytelling mark out some of the distinctive challenges of mothering while black. Eloise, Lessie, and Pattie, by writing of their daily triumph over the "mortal challenge" of being black in the United States at times of tremendous upheaval and change (Baldwin 169), reify theories of mothering that take into account DuBois's two-pronged awareness of being African American in the United States. As Dorothy Roberts notes:

> There are joys and sorrows that most mothers share. . . . There are also experiences mothers do not share, in part because of race. Most white mothers do not know the pain of raising Black children in a racist society. . . . Black mothers must bear the incredible task of guarding their children's identities against innumerable messages that brand them as less than human. (4-5)

Roberts de-essentializes scholarly conversations about mothering by discussing ways in which race and class intersect with gender, and she thereby creates new definitions of what it means to be an African American woman who is also a mother. She enhances her argument by rendering historical tracings of ways that racism and patriarchy have reshaped what motherhood means for black mothers, starting with the facts that, under slavery, many women were initiated into motherhood because of a rape by their master and that black mothers' sons and daughters were considered "property," which could be "sold" and relocated.

Besides equipping their children with strategies like the blues aesthetic, black mothers are also faced with the challenge of unequal distribution and exchange of these positive literary messages. While Woodson's text directly addresses the separation of Sooie's great-grandmother from her own mother through being sold, it is a difficult subject to broach in contemporary literature for young children, and the texts that do address it are unlikely to come into the hands of children victimized by the contemporary slave trade. Thus the imperative for production, distribution, and exchange falls into the hands of knowledgeable adults committed to becoming Hughes's "Negro Mother" by sharing these representations of mothering as a form of social activism. While Marx emphasized the interdependence of the elements of production, distribution, and exchange, the circulation of the social facts of mothering while black, in both textual representation and real life, have not yet realized this ideal. According to Marx:

> Production creates the objects that correspond to the given needs; distribution divides them up according to social laws; exchange further parcels out the already divided shares in accord with individual needs; and finally, in consumption, the product steps outside this social movement and becomes a direct object and servant of individual need, and satisfies it in being consumed. (89)

While the books under discussion certainly meet any and all definitions of good literature, the social norms and economic conditions that govern distribution and exchange still tend to marginalize these expressions of the "Negro Mother." Although Eloise did not write about having children, the stories told by Pattie, Lessie, and Eloise in *Childtimes* reflect common values of mothering among the women. These values include the passing on of family stories from one generation to the next. This is exemplified in all three women, and especially in Eloise's career choice as a professional children's book writer. The same is true for Woodson, Nelson, Johnson, and Watson, who all participate in the mothering work of sharing stories with
young readers. All of these writers also exemplify the idea that being African American mothers and women necessitates daily strivings in the face of injustice.

If CHAT involves unearthing pathways “heavy with history and power invested in them,” exposing those routes, and continually shifting between the here-and-now and the larger, macrolevel forces that created those well-worn pathways in the first place, then further discussion will reveal ways in which these literary mothers’ burden is not unlike other women’s stories today. Hughes’s poem “The Negro Mother” allows us to linger on what once was (and what still remains as) a fundamental conception of motherhood among African American women—that is, protecting their children from oppressive forces (referred to by Hughes as “the white brother”) and implored and inspiring their children to ascend to their greatest potential (“the great stairs”). History provides no shortage of figures who did, indeed, ascend to soaring heights, in large part because of the effort and sacrifice of their mothers. Yet, the collective memory of storytellers in the African American tradition will also always remember the tragic cases along with the triumphant ones. The two are inextricably linked and are as important to the tenets of this chapter as the relationship between past and present ideations of mothering.

Other Mothers’ Sons

The mothers of Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray—as well as others whose names have not risen to our national consciousness—have in common that they are the “mother of a boy martyr,” and the “mother of sorrows, of justice denied” (Nelson, lines 14, 2). Emmett Till was lynched in 1955 in Money, Mississippi, by a gang of white men who alleged that the fourteen-year-old whistled at a white woman. The young teen was beaten, had an eye gouged out, and was strapped to an industrial fan before being thrown in a nearby river, where his body stayed for three days. Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, intentionally chose an open casket to show the world what had been done to her son. Till-Mobley later reflected that the “self-confidence and a sense of life’s possibilities” (Till-Mobley and Benson) that she had tried to give to her son while parenting him as a single mother in Chicago may have brought about his demise, because that disposition didn’t jibe with the social codes of the Deep South at that time.

Compassion for Emmett Till’s mother at the time of his death elicited worldwide attention in much the same way the spotlight shone on Sybrina Martin, the mother of Trayvon Martin, for many months after the seventeen-year-old’s murder by a racist neighborhood watch volunteer in 2012 in Sanford, Florida. So too goes the story of Jordan Davis, who was also killed at age seventeen in 2012, while he sat in the back of a sports utility vehicle that was parked at a gas station and playing loud music in Jacksonville, Florida. Jordan’s murder was at the hands of a different patron of the gas station, a white man who was annoyed by the music and by the presence of the African American young men who rode in the car along with Jordan. Lucia McBath, Jordan’s mother, echoed nearly the same words that had been spoken decades earlier by Mamie Till-Mobley: In a 2014 interview, McBath said of her parenting style, “We always encouraged him to be strong. To speak out. We tried to teach him to speak what you feel and think diplomatically” (qtd. in Coates). Jordan Davis was a good student who had traveled internationally, and his grandfather had been the leader of the NAACP in Illinois.

Civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, took place following Lesley McFadden’s loss of her son Michael Brown in 2014. The media zoomed in on what came to be known as simply #Ferguson, a metonym for an unarmed black teen who died because of a police officer’s bullets, for the rage caused when authorities allowed his body to lie in the street (in the August sun) for four hours after the incident, and for the teen’s nonexistent future. Then, #Baltimore came into existence when Freddie Gray died due to a severed spine he suffered while riding unrestrained in a police wagon in Baltimore, Maryland, in 2015. While protests at the death of Gray were swirling around Baltimore—peaceful and agitated—the actions of a black mother, Toya Graham, were captured on video, went viral, and garnered international press. Looking glamorous in a long ombre weave and false eyelashes as she attended the protest, Graham recognized her son, dressed in black, baggy sweatpants, among the crowd. She saw him pitching rocks at the riot police, and the video shows her maternal instinct to protect him from harm. Graham ran after her son, pulled at his clothes, yelled at him for taunting the police, and smacked him upside the head. Her story is interesting in that the conversations black mothers have with their sons, and, should words fail, the smacks a black mother may give her son to drill down on the idea of staying out of trouble, or just staying alive, are normally private. Graham’s display of her protective love for her only son became public; it was distributed, exchanged, and consumed by millions, including the white audience.
who may just be becoming attuned to the historical and ongoing dangers of being black in America.

The list of black mothers' sons who have died violent deaths is too long. Nelson's elegy for the murdered Emmett Till thus speaks for all of these mothers in the expansive cycle of mothering while black:

Surely you didn't know you would devote the rest of your changed life to dignified public remembrance of how Emmett died, innocence slaughtered by the hands of hate. (lines 5-8)

Our exploration ofmothering in these few texts guided by CHAT is important in that it weaves together the past with the present and the tragic with the daily triumphs, told in the forms of a three-generation memoir, an autobiographical picture book, an illustrated crown of sonnets, and the multivoiced and polyphonic novel. The historically racist roots of the United States cannot be relegated to the past because they continually, and often silently, influence much of what goes on in the present day. With its dynamic heuristic making available the various components that comprise culture, history, and activity, CHAT enables us to see more clearly how the ideological gyres are reproduced and reified through a cycle of repetition and expansion over time.

The men who lynched Till in 1955 served no jail time, despite confessing to the crime. The murderer of Martin in 2012 also walked free immediately after the killing, and after a trial he was found "not guilty" and served no sentence. Davis's killer ordered a pizza after the incident and was initially not convicted of first-degree murder but is now serving jail time. At the time of this writing, six Baltimore police officers have been charged in the death of Freddie Gray, but the outcome of those charges has not yet been determined. Despite how devastating these truths are, what can provide hope is that there simultaneously exist well-trodden pathways through which African American mothers have impelled and will continue to impel their children toward light and progress, even in the face of arbitrary hatred. The activity of writing black lives, or reading them, is one such pathway.

1. In addition to its articulation in primary texts by Vygotsky, Leontiev, and later, Engeström, CHAT is most widely known through its application in educational psychology and composition pedagogy and theory, where resources abound. This, too, will be an applied discussion, so the theory will be explained only insofar as it is relevant to the current analysis. For a concise overview of the history and core principles of CHAT, we refer readers to chapter 2, "Understanding Cultural Historical Activity Theory," of Lisa C. Yamagata-Lynch, Activity Systems Analysis Methods for Understanding Complex Learning Environments, and Wolff-Michael Roth, "Activity Theory and Education: An Introduction."

2. An epilogue to Childtimes points out that Pattie Ridley Jones, Greenfield's grandmother, was deceased at the time of publication, but she had written a manuscript of life stories. Thus, only Greenfield and her mother (Little) are listed as coauthors on the book's cover in the three-generation memoir.

3. The idea of mapping onto the heuristic of the activity triangle the four Marxist principles of production, consumption, distribution, and exchange has been preconceived by scholars such as Wolff-Michael Roth. See Roth, "The Politics and Rhetoric of Conversation and Discourse Analysis: A Reflexive, Phenomenological Hermeneutic Analysis."

Works Cited


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Chapter 7

"The hills were in her bones": Living in the Blend of Mothers and Environments

Anna Katrina Gutierrez

The terms “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature” are introduced to us from childhood to ascribe the symbiotic relationship between mother and child to our relationship with nature and the planet. Even though “Mother” and “Earth/Nature” belong to distinct categories—one a woman, the other the natural or physical world—our minds easily combine them into a unique and comprehensible mental image. We are able to make sense of the integrated ideas Mother Earth and Mother Nature by identifying similarities in the vocabulary associated with schemas of motherhood and nature/Earth, such as “nurture,” “nourish,” “fertile,” and “fecund,” and in vital relations, such as “source of food, water and shelter” and “treat with love and respect”; in other words, similarities in embodied cognitive acts that are structured in physical and cultural contexts and form the basis of scripts. Scripts describe a set of remembered actions, or “experiential repertoires,” through which we filter our expectations and organize emergent information (Herman 89).

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner suggest that this kind of interactive meaning making comes naturally to us and, furthermore, that it is the key to human imagination. They state that the cross-linking of elements and vital relations between seemingly unrelated conceptual domains unfolds in a new emergent space rather than exists as a listing of comparisons and that this unique mental space is the product of conceptual blending, an automatic cognitive process in which a “third space” is formed from the inputs of two or more domains. This blended space then becomes the source of