

5-2019

# Intergenerational Teenage Motherhood: Memory and Material Culture

Aspen Christian

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds)

Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Christian, Aspen, "Intergenerational Teenage Motherhood: Memory and Material Culture" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/3203](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3203)

This Thesis is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [deposit@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:deposit@gc.cuny.edu).

INTERGENERATIONAL TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD:  
MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

by

ASPEN CHRISTIAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women and Gender Studies in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University  
of New York

2019

© 2019

ASPEN CHRISTIAN

All Rights Reserved

Intergenerational teenage motherhood:  
Memory and material culture

by

Aspen Christian

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Date

---

Dana-Ain Davis

Thesis Advisor

---

Date

---

Dana-Ain Davis

Executive Officer

## ABSTRACT

Intergenerational teenage motherhood: Memory and material culture

by

Aspen Christian

Advisor: Dana-Ain Davis

This paper explores how memories and material culture can be used to understand intergenerational teenage motherhood. Intimate, feminist ethnography is used to explore the experiences of my mother and my grandmother who were both teenage mothers. Teenage mothers are blamed for perpetuating a cycle of poverty in the United States by conservative and neoliberal adherents, yet women were young mothers throughout the history of the United States. In their minds, teenage mothers have daughters who become teenage mothers themselves, which then maintains poverty across generations. This project counters that false narrative by focusing on the experiences of intergenerational teenage mothers through the stories they tell related to belongings from their time as young mothers. I argue we need to focus on teenage mother's needs instead of viewing their circumstances as a 'problem' that needs solved.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	1
II. Literature Review.....	5
III. Historical Overview.....	8
IV. Methodology.....	21
V. Teenage Pregnancy in Indiana .....	23
VI. Discussion and Interviews.....	25
VII. Conclusion.....	32
VIII. Bibliography.....	34

## LIST OF FIGURES

I. Figure 1. Map of Indiana.....	24
II. Figure 2. My mother while pregnant.....	27
III. Figure 3. My mother holding me as an infant.....	28

## Introduction

“From my memory, my mom was 13 when she got pregnant. She turned 14 then had my older brother one week later. Then, I think, she had me when she was 15. I believe after that she had my younger brother when she was 16. I think that’s how it went. Now, remember, she didn’t ever tell me this. I’m just putting the pieces together.”<sup>1</sup>

As I sit on my couch in New York City FaceTime-ing my sixty-seven-year-old grandmother, who I call Mams, she recounts her early childhood memories about being raised by a teenage mother. We are not only talking about her mother’s experiences during her teenage years. Mams and I are exploring three generations of teenage motherhood together, while also diving into our family’s history over the last seventy years. Her mother had her first child at age 13, and 3 children by age 16. Mams had her first child after graduating high school and getting married at age 18. My mother, her middle child, gave birth to me at age 16. But as we can see by my grandmother’s shaky memory of these early childhood events, a clearly archived family history surrounding young motherhood was nonexistent. Our hours spent having these long-distant conversations over FaceTime were primarily centered on her memories and recollections of the past; explorations into unquestioned territory that had not been explored until we sat down to have these discussions.

Talking to my grandmother about these experiences led me to question what it means to be a teenage mother in the United States. Teenage motherhood is often viewed as a negative occurrence, in which the young mothers are chastised for becoming pregnant at a young age.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I refer to individuals who become pregnant as women and mothers. However, I recognize that becoming pregnant and identifying as a woman/mother is not the only way individuals can experience pregnancy and birth. Transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary individuals can also become pregnant and give birth. See Briggs, Laura. *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Briggs discusses the specific issues faced by LGBTQ individuals who decide to become pregnant, give birth, and raise children.

However, women becoming young mothers is not a new trend in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Simply tracking the statistics of teenage pregnancy rates shows a trend over the decades. The 1950s saw an all-time high rate of teenage pregnancy in 1957, which roughly translated to 96 births per 1,000 teenage women.<sup>4</sup> Teenage pregnancy rates rose throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The 1990s saw a drastic drop and an all-time low rate (up until that point) of teenage pregnancy and birth rates.<sup>6</sup> As of 2016, the teenage birth rate is at the lowest level ever recorded, and 74 percent of all teenage births are now to 18- and 19-year olds.<sup>7</sup> By looking at these numbers, it is evident that the question of teenage motherhood does not equate to the age of the woman when she becomes pregnant. If teenage pregnancy is actually in decline, why has the narrative that young motherhood is inherently a negative occurrence emerged?

The framing of these women's circumstances is what has changed, and we must analyze the culture and politics surrounding these statistics to make sense of the shifting human behavior, perception, and representation. By tracing the public conversation surrounding teenage pregnancy starting from the 1960s, one can recognize that these conversations in the United States have been continually reconstructed over time. Americans develop attitudes and norms, based on larger political agendas and religious ideologies, about pregnancy that dictate who they believe should have children, at what age, and under what circumstances. Women who become pregnant under circumstances that do not fit into these attitudes and norms are often othered and

---

<sup>3</sup> See Luker, Kristin. *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996. Luker discusses how conversations about teenage pregnancy in the United States can be traced back to the Puritans in colonial America. During that time period, out-of-wedlock births were deemed unacceptable. Over time the narrative shifted to single mothers, and eventually to teenage mothers.

<sup>4</sup> Boonstra, Heather D. "Teen Pregnancy: Trends And Lessons Learned." *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Martin, Joyce A., M.P.H., Brady E. Hamilton, Ph.D., Michelle J.K. Osterman, M.H.S., Anne K. Driscoll, Ph.D., and Patrick Drake, M.S. "Births Final Data for 2016." *National Vital Statistics Reports* 67, no. 1 (January 31, 2018): 4.

ostracized.<sup>8</sup> For example, teenage pregnancy can lead to negative effects in the young woman's schooling. According to Wendy Luttrell, who conducted an ethnographic study analyzing the schooling of teenage motherhood, pregnant teenagers become "highly visible in the public imaginary and in political rhetoric about what is wrong with America."<sup>9</sup> Up until the early 1970s, it was not mandated that every girl, pregnant or not, be entitled to a public education in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

On a more intimate level, I began questioning what it means to come from a familial line of teenage pregnancy. Talking to my grandmother about her recollections of her mother's experiences, her personal experiences with teenage motherhood, and her experiences with raising a daughter who also became a teenage mother brought to light the different contexts that shaped each of their stories. For example, Kristen Luker argues that during the 1950s and previously, the age of the mother is not what decided if she were 'fit' to raise a child.<sup>11</sup> Rather, she continues, it was these women's status of wedlock that determined if it were appropriate for them to become pregnant and raise children.<sup>12</sup> In other words, having children young was not a problem during this decade. It's simply what they were expected to do. This was my great grandmother's experience, and later my grandmother's experience in the 1960s.

As I started having these conversations with both my mother and grandmother, I struggled with how to get them to openly talk about the topic. The set up was simple: I would ask open-ended questions and they would respond. I was not getting the results I had hoped for. After listening back to the early conversations I had with them, I realized a theme. They often

---

<sup>8</sup> Luker, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Luttrell, Wendy. *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens*. New York: Routledge, 2003: 3.

<sup>10</sup> Luker, 64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

referred to objects, part of their material world, which reminded them of memories they had from the time of their pregnancies. Our conversations began taking new light once we started focusing on the memories evoked from photographs, clothing, and scrapbooks. Anthropologist Andrew Jones argues that “human societies have produced a series of devices for storing memory in extrabodily form,” which creates a relationship between the human beings, the material world around them, and memories evoked from materiality.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind, and the early experiences I had interviewing my mother and grandmother, I became interested in the stories they told about their pregnancies by focusing on memories evoked by objects associated with those periods in their life. Aline Gubrium and Christie Barcelos argue that narratives play a key role in discussing teenage motherhood because narratives have the ability to “focus on inequalities and propose different perspectives on causes and consequences,” which allows us to utilize a more “nuanced approach to complex social problems.”<sup>14</sup> In my research with my mother and grandmother, I am focusing on the nuanced experiences they had as teenage mothers. These personal stories complicate the negative narrative surrounding teenage motherhood in the United States, and ultimately offers a different perspective on the way people discuss and debate the topic of young motherhood.

In this paper, I explore teenage motherhood through intimate conversations with my mother and grandmother and the memories about their experiences. First, I review anthropological and sociological literature about teenage motherhood in the United States. Second, I provide a historical overview explaining how teenage motherhood has become a ‘problem.’ Third, my methodology explains intimate ethnography conducted with family

---

<sup>13</sup> Jones, Andrew. *Memory and Material Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 2.

<sup>14</sup> Barcelos, Christie A., and Aline C. Gubrium. "Reproducing Stories: Strategic Narratives of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood." *Social Problems* 61, no. 3 (August 2014): 467.

members. Fourth, I provide a brief overview of teenage pregnancy in Indiana, more specifically two small towns located northeast of Indianapolis, which is where both my mother and grandmother have lived their entire lives. Next, I discuss the themes that emerged through the interview process. I conclude by placing this work in the larger discussion surrounding teenage motherhood and urging for a new way of understanding young mother's stories.

## **Literature Review**

To understand more about teenage motherhood, I turned to anthropological and sociological research about the topic. Focusing on research centering the lives of teenage mothers, several themes run through the various works about both the period of pregnancy and the period of transitioning into motherhood. Themes include the schooling of young mothers/pregnant teenagers, the intersections of race, gender, and class, telling the narratives of teenage motherhood, and the politics surrounding teenage motherhood. For example, Lauren Silver, Childhood Studies and anthropology scholar, discusses the intersections of child welfare, resistance, and young motherhood. Hear Our Stories, an online digital storytelling collection of teenage mother's stories run by scholars at the University of Massachusetts, examines "sexual and reproductive health disparities among young parenting Latinas."<sup>15</sup> Sociologists Mary Patrice Erdmans and Timothy Black tell the stories of "108 brown, white, and black teen mothers" to demonstrate "how the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race and class shape the biographies of young mothers."<sup>16</sup>

Kristen Luker uses the term *fitness* to describe the way Americans categorize who is "ready" to have children and notes that America's definition of *fitness* changes over time.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> "Hear Our Stories." UMass Amherst. <https://www.umass.edu/hearourstories/about>.

<sup>16</sup> Erdmans, Mary Patrice, and Timothy Black. *On Becoming a Teen Mom: Life Before Pregnancy*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015: 3.

<sup>17</sup> Luker, 15.

Teenage pregnancy, which is now largely a dominant public perception of an *unfit* pregnancy in the contemporary United States, is a relatively new way of classifying an old problem.

Americans now believe that age is a primary factor to consider when deciding if someone is fit to be pregnant and become a mother. No longer is wedlock or the lack of fatherly economic support the primary reasons for dismissing a woman's pregnancy. After tracing this long history of pregnancy *fitness*, Luker poses the questions: "is the American public primarily concerned with the *age* of the young people involved? If all of the women currently considered pregnant teenagers would just postpone pregnancy until after their twentieth birthday, would the critics be satisfied?"<sup>18</sup> The simple answer is no. We are still talking about the same problem, but it is just discussed in new ways.

Erdman and Black's sociological study of over 100 teenage mothers highlights the diversity of experiences they have in their lives. When justifying why it is important to center their experiences, Gubrium and Barcelos note that "their voices are largely absent" from many of the conversations about teenage motherhood.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the research surrounding teenage motherhood needs to center their experiences rather than creating negative stereotypes about what type of lifestyle they lead. Sociologist Wendy Luttrell, who conducted a collaborative study with teenage mothers in an educational setting, notes that we must focus on the content and themes present in the stories told to us by teenage mothers.<sup>20</sup> By doing so, we can begin to shift the narrative from categorizations, such as 'delinquent,' 'welfare queen,' and 'dependent,'<sup>21</sup> to a plethora of experiences by varying individuals who happen to become pregnant during a certain

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Luttrell, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Silver, Lauren J. *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015: 88.

age range. When taking this stance, it becomes necessary to critically engage with the cultural and political implications of these negative stereotypes, which includes analyzing “sexuality, race, poverty, gender, and a changing world economy,” that are all simultaneously used to demonize teenage mothers in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

In Luttrell’s studies, the young mothers participating in the study were tasked with creating self-portrait art that represented their identity in time, place, and representation.<sup>23</sup> This creative method allowed the young mothers to express their feelings in a different way than oral conversation. In analyzing the portraits after having a discussion with the mothers about why they chose to portray themselves the way they had in their portraits, Luttrell noted themes centered on self- and body image, self-worth and value, conflicting emotions, and agency.<sup>24</sup> Self-image arose in Silver’s research as well, but it came about when analyzing the relationship her subjects had with administrative employees that dictated the young women’s housing and stipend allowances.<sup>25</sup> In this situation, Silver argues that “oppressions along race, gender, class, sexuality, and age dimensions interact in complicated and mutually reinforcing ways.”<sup>26</sup> When analyzing young mother’s identity this way, it becomes clear how negative stereotypes are placed on their circumstances even if their perceptions of their own lives vary from what is assumed of them.

Luker, when discussing how to move forward with ‘fixing’ teenage motherhood, advocates for policy change, and most importantly notes that the “troubles that teenage parents face today are the same ones that all Americans face: changes in the nature of marriage, in

---

<sup>22</sup> Luker, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Luttrell, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Silver, 126.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 127.

relations between men and women, in the relations between parents and children.”<sup>27</sup> The experiences of teenage mothers reaches far beyond their own experiences, and other Americans are facing the same type of dilemmas that teenage mothers are dealing with intimately. Luttrell argues that we are in a period of the “transitional process,” which explains that “human beings feel most alive when they are able to weave their inner subjective feelings with external objective realities.”<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, Erdmans and Black argue that we need to get past the distraction, which entails centering “the voice of the mother as a reflection of gender and class, race and ethnicity, personality and biography, and mind and self.”<sup>29</sup> Research moving forward needs to continue to focus on the experience of teenage mothers, how they view themselves, and how they view themselves in connection with the world around them. Then, by having these conversations and shifting the narrative, as Luker suggests, leads to policy change that better supports teenage mothers and their experiences.

## **Historical Overview**

### *How did teenage pregnancy become a “problem?”*

Negative attitudes and norms about teenage motherhood are constructed through political campaigns by social conservatives. Race and taxes were implicit and explicit targets of the right, and this had a drastically negative impact on the lives of teenage mothers. Over the decades, social conservative’s campaign ideology used a three-prong approach that targeted teenage pregnancy and motherhood. First, social conservatives advocated against black, hippie, and anti-war movements, which included drug and “free sex” culture as well as Vietnam War protests.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Luker, 181.

<sup>28</sup> Luttrell, 180.

<sup>29</sup> Erdmans and Black, 39.

<sup>30</sup> See Lassiter, Matthew D. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Lassiter explains Nixon’s campaign strategies against these movements. All of these movements challenge the ethnocentric, white majority in the United States that thrive on racist, sexist, and patriarchal ideologies.

Later, the party would target the LGBT movement under the same campaign ideology arguing that deviation from the traditional family structure disrupted the concept of the nuclear family.<sup>31</sup> All of these efforts were disguised under social conservative's stance on law and order.

Second, tax ideology and policy agendas of social conservatives were used as a method to advocate for less government spending and bigger tax breaks. One tactic used to achieve this goal was explicitly attacking the welfare system. Single mothers were framed as dependent on the state, and the "welfare queen" became a derogatory way of describing these mothers. During Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign, for example, he brings the image of the "welfare queen" into public conversation by using an unnamed woman on welfare as a trope to convince the public that welfare is inherently bad and should not be a publicly-funded operation: "She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year."<sup>32</sup> By using these mothers as a scapegoat, social conservatives were, through underlying methods, advocating for less government spending on social welfare that would create a smaller government role in social wellbeing and allow a neoliberal capitalist model to flourish.

Third, social conservatives advocated for a rigid set of family values that appealed to the religious right. According to Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson, who research how American politics intertwine with far right Christian religious adherents, the Christian Right:

...seeks to influence Republican nominations and to influence or control the party apparatus, help the Republicans control the White House and Congress, achieve legislative victories in Congress, and state legislatures, influence decisions by the U.S.

---

<sup>31</sup> See Wilcox, Clyde, and Carin Robinson. *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. Chapter 2 provides statistics about views on LGBT rights by different Christian denominations. Chapter 4 explains how the far right use religion to undermine LGBT rights.

<sup>32</sup> Demby, Gene. "The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original 'Welfare Queen'." NPR. December 20, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>.

Supreme Court, win control of schoolboards in order to influence school curricula, and win referenda in state and counties to implement its agenda.”<sup>33</sup>

Political methods, such as the ones outlined by Wilcox and Robinson, are used by the religious right to ensure that American government reflects their narrow set of beliefs. Refusing to recognize that the United States is religiously diverse, the religious right continually assert that “America is somehow chosen by God to fulfill his will,” which means “America is God’s chosen people today.”<sup>34</sup> Connecting American patriotism and the Christian Right clearly illustrates how far right religions enter the political arena in the United States. A strong notion of the nuclear family is central to their beliefs of what America should be, which means their political actions include attacks on abortion rights, women’s rights, sex outside of marriage, and gay rights.<sup>35</sup> The tactic used by socially conservative politicians, in this regard, was to construct the nuclear family as the norm and deem any variations or alternatives as sinister, which allowed them to gain the support of the religious right.

Together these three prongs—law and order, taxes and government spending, and family values—became the pillars of the social conservative’s campaign strategy. Tactics used to fulfill these strategies included a war on drugs and targeting radical black movements, like the Black Panthers, and activists like Angela Davis.<sup>36</sup> Anti-black ideology was perpetuated by social conservatives and has led to astronomical incarceration rates of black men. Policies such as the

---

<sup>33</sup> Wilcox and Robinson, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>35</sup> See White House Working Group on the Family. *The Family, Preserving America's Future: A Report of the Working Group on the Family*, 1986. Reagan was a strong proponent of the nuclear family with male heads of household. In order to keep this type of system in the United States, women’s rights were attacked. Controlling women’s reproductive rights is a tactic used by the right to confine them to domestic duties inside the home.

<sup>36</sup> See Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. See Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York, NY: International Publishers, 2008.). The black power movement thrived throughout the 1960s and 1970s and incorporated radical leftist political stances that challenged racist systems in the United States. Angela Davis was put on the FBI’s most wanted list—in hopes of containing the movement that the right saw as a threat to their values. Nixon called Davis a “dangerous terrorist.”

Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which was proposed by President Nixon in 1969, regulated women's bodies and family norms because it required welfare assistance to flow through the male breadwinner of the family. In 1973, the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War ceased, and the country entered a recession that caused the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) of 1935 to cease expansion. The AFDC was the most prominent welfare act that provided single mothers with assistance to raise their children without a male breadwinner. Now, public policies were actively reflecting the need to adhere to the nuclear family structure in order to obtain government-funded assistance.

AFDC was enacted by President Roosevelt in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act and was funded by both state and federal governments.<sup>37</sup> The idea behind this program was to provide assistance to children of families that had low or no income. More specifically, it aimed to provide aid to single mothers who were raising their children without a male wage earner.<sup>38</sup> The Social Security Act of 1935 came from a growing concern with poverty in inner cities, which were mainly comprised of African Americans.<sup>39</sup> In its early days, AFDC favored assistance for widowed mothers and overlooked unwed, divorced, or deserted mothers.<sup>40</sup> However, this changed over time as family dynamics changed throughout the decades. For instance, half of all single mothers in the 1940s were widows, by 1970 only 20 percent were widows, and by 1990 only 7 percent were widows. These numbers show that families were changing, and the underlying factor was economic.

---

<sup>37</sup> Kail, Ben Lennox, and Marc Dixon. "The Uneven Patterning of Welfare Benefits at the Twilight of AFDC: Assessing the Influence of Institutions, Race, and Citizen Preferences." *Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2011): 377.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, Linda. *Pitied but not entitled: Single mothers and the history of welfare*. (New York: Free Press, 1994): 4.

<sup>39</sup> Luker. 52.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

President Lyndon Johnson ran on a campaign to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the mid-1960s through his “Great Society” plan. Johnson’s War on Poverty included an expansion of the government’s role in education, health care, and notably led to the passing of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964, which is described as “an eclectic collection of programs to channel resources and services into poor communities.”<sup>41</sup> The intention of the act was to “unlock opportunity through an attack on the ‘root causes’ of poverty, rather than redistributing wealth or income.”<sup>42</sup> Simply, the act strived to provide education to individuals living in poverty that would then lead to jobs that get them out of poverty. Johnson’s attempt to create the Great Society was clearly liberal and did not exist without criticism from the right. At the root of the debate was how big a role the government should play in social welfare, specifically how much money should be invested in such a project. Social conservatives were in favor of less involvement, which became increasingly evident with Richard Nixon’s rise to power and the continued conservatism through Ronald Reagan’s administration.

This attack on government intervention on poverty by social conservatives used negative racialized narratives to gain support for their small government agenda. African Americans constituted most of the population living in inner city poverty, which is why Johnson’s Great Society focused on both alleviating poverty and racial injustice at the same time. One could not be complete without the other. From this perspective, the EOA coalition politicized poverty by framing “the inner city crisis as a crisis of the Black family.”<sup>43</sup> This led to people viewing black families as broken, disadvantaged, and in crisis. Again, the nuclear family was the standard and

---

<sup>41</sup> Chappell, Marisa. *War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America*. (University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 15.

<sup>42</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. *Building the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*. (London, UK: Penguin Publishing Group, 2018): 8.

<sup>43</sup> Chappell, 10.

any kinship formation strayed from it were deemed unacceptable. This time though, African Americans were the sole perpetrators of breaking this norm.

In 1965, when the Great Society flourished under Johnson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of labor to Johnson and future advisor of Nixon, released *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), commonly known as *The Moynihan Report*. The report claimed that black poverty was attributed to the high rate of black single mothers being head of household.<sup>44</sup> In other words, he was taking the white, typical American nuclear family and framing it as an objective standard that all families should strive to achieve. From Moynihan's perspective, each family needed a strong male authority figure who was the wage earner. The report blamed "Black 'matriarchs' for much of the 'tangle of pathology' he found in African American households."<sup>45</sup> This argument blames Black males for underachieving and Black females for having children out of wedlock, who would then raise their children to perpetuate this cycle of poverty.

Moynihan's "tangle of pathology" was used in the report to explain why black Americans continued to live in poverty. This concept argued that "'ethnicity' itself identifies a total objectification of human and cultural motives," which means that the "'white' family, by implication, and the 'Negro Family,' by outright assertion, are in a constant opposition of binary meanings."<sup>46</sup> Moynihan was arguing that race is at the heart of the issue, not economic factors or ethnocentric social norms. More specifically, "African American family structure was interpreted as a unique product of residual influences of slavery and discrimination."<sup>47</sup> In regards to the

---

<sup>44</sup> Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> Stacey, Judith. *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late-twentieth-century America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. *Mamas Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*. (*Diacritics* 17, no. 2, 1987): 66.

<sup>47</sup> Greenbaum, Susan D. *Blaming the Poor the Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images about Poverty*. (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2015): 47.

three-pronged attack on teenage mothers, the *Moynihan Report* facilitated the government's ability to blame African Americans for their lack of economic prosperity and also allowed a direct attack on single black mothers. Simply, the United States is a patriarchal society "which presumes male leadership in private in public affairs," yet "African American culture favored a 'matriarchal' family structure that was at odds with success."<sup>48</sup>

Moynihan's report had a lasting effect, and it gave social conservatives validation to campaign on a racist anti-welfare platform. In order to change African American families, according to Moynihan, Black men needed a stake in the economy. If this were the case, they would be able to provide for their families. Then, these families would turn into patriarchs and leave matriarchs behind. Nixon successfully ran for office in 1968, and he targeted the "Silent Majority" with his "Southern Strategy." By definition, a *silent majority* is an "unspecified large group of people in a country or group who do not express their opinions publicly."<sup>49</sup> Nixon's campaign targeted this group mainly in the south and Midwest suburban areas by formulating a racialized presidential campaign. White American homeowners who had "achieved a residentially segregated and federally subsidized version of the American Dream" felt as if their interests were ignored under liberal administrations, such as LBJ's.

Nixon referred to these suburban families as Forgotten Americans.<sup>50</sup> By targeting this group, Nixon was able to overlap the interests of these Forgotten Americans with "Republican conservatism that extended well beyond a right-wing base."<sup>51</sup> Most Americans were segregated from black communities—white Americans had moved to suburban areas and black Americans were living in the inner cities. After World War II (WWII) ended, white flight from cities

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>49</sup> "Silent Majority." Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/silent-majority>.

<sup>50</sup> Lassiter, Matthew D. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton Press, 2007): 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 8.

occurred nationally. White people were worried that complete desegregation and mixed-race neighborhoods would lead to Blacks taking over their facilities and resources.<sup>52</sup> They connected black residents in their neighborhoods to a decrease in property value and public services. Ultimately, white flight in this time period led to hyper segregation, or “a condition in which Whites and Blacks are not just segregated but also so spatially isolated from each other that it is possible to live a life never interacting with someone of a different race.”<sup>53</sup> White people fled their communities because of their racial discrimination and prejudice against black people and sought to uphold the previous segregation of the races.

Nixon used this history to his advantage and appealed to white Americans by pinning black Americans as the “problem.” In doing so, he structured his campaign around law and order and state rights. Nixon’s argument for state rights was framed around returning power “to the people.”<sup>54</sup> However, Nixon was really advocating for less federal involvement in welfare programs that were expanded under LBJ’s Great Society. By this point, the silent majority believed black Americans saw welfare monies as entitlement rather than an emergency assistance plan.<sup>55</sup> Entitlements grew from right-winged rhetoric by Republican politicians like Moynihan and Nixon. The Southern Strategy had multiple components centralized around law and order and state rights, but the strongest persuasions pulled from the *Brown v. The Board of Education* decision, the Vietnam War, and the state of the welfare system.<sup>56</sup>

The 1954 Supreme Court case, *Brown vs The Board of Education*, marked the desegregation of public schools and was immediately met with violent white resistance.<sup>57</sup> With

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Schaefer, Richard T. *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. Vol. 1. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Skinner, CW. "Coard Raps Nixon's States Rights Plans." *Bay State Banner*VI, no. 20 (January 28, 1971).

<sup>55</sup> Lassiter, Matthew D. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007): 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Schaefer, R. T. *Encyclopedia of race, ethnicity, and society*.

the desegregation of schools came mixing of whites and blacks in other public spaces such as parks and stores. The crux of Nixon's intervention sits at the underlying economic assumption that the existence of black residents in white-dominated neighborhoods leads to a decrease in the white resident's economic standing. Black people were seen as a threat to economic security and a middle-class, suburban, white lifestyle. His specific target was white parents who did not want their children attending school with black children and who did not have the resources to relocate to isolated suburban communities.<sup>58</sup> Nixon knew that gaining the support of these Americans could draw them onto the side of Republican conservatives and that this one stance could outweigh his political stances on other issues.

Nixon's presidency came in wake of anti-war protests that condemned the United State's involvement in the Vietnam War. On one side of the political spectrum, people were protesting the war and advocating for peace. This came at the tail end of the hippie counterculture movement that had flourished throughout the 1960s. In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech that drew connections between the US's involvement in the Vietnam War and the War on Poverty taking place in the United States:

A few years ago there was a shining moment. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything on a society gone mad on war.<sup>59</sup>

King's speech criticized the lack of support for poor Americans by the federal government. Yet, the federal government was actively pumping millions of dollars into another war. On the other end of the spectrum, constituting the Silent Majority, people were scared of communism taking

---

<sup>58</sup> Brown, Frank. "Nixons "Southern Strategy" and Forces against Brown." *The Journal of Negro Education* 73, no. 3 (2004): 192.

<sup>59</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." Speech, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.

hold of the United States. Nixon's presidential campaign took a strong anti-communist stance and intertwined this narrative with the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam. Nixon argued that the United States needed to join together in unity, even though his actual rhetoric deepened the country's divide.<sup>60</sup>

On the welfare front, Nixon proposed the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) in 1969 once taking office. FAP was a welfare reform plan, and Nixon described the country in the midst of a crisis by stating it as "an urban crisis, a social crisis—and at the same time, a crisis of confidence in the capacity of the government to do its job."<sup>61</sup> The underlying cause of this crisis was the public welfare system, which Nixon framed as a bureaucratic, colossal failure. Again, this was part of his strategy to appeal to the silent majority that believed black Americans were taking the welfare system for granted. He "condemned the welfare system for drawing poor people into overcrowded cities, inducing fathers to abandon their families, discouraging wage labor, and being unfair to middle-class taxpayers."<sup>62</sup> The FAP's suggested reform had different eligibility qualifications than AFDC, which had continued expanding over the last 2 decades. With FAP, "income rather than family structure would determine eligibility for welfare."<sup>63</sup> FAP's proposed plan had strong roots in *The Moynihan Report* that had been released during LBJ's presidency, and it rooted economic participation at the core of its proposed changes.

Moynihan served as Nixon's advisor throughout his presidency as a self-identifying anti-poverty liberal and was the most persuasive politician in favor of FAP. During this time, people viewed the AFDC welfare system as detrimental to familial kinships by promoting single

---

<sup>60</sup> Cressman, Dale L. "The Great Silent Majority: Nixon's 1969 Speech on Vietnamization." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (September 2015): 619.

<sup>61</sup> Chappell, 65.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

motherhood and fathers to leave their families without monetary support. FAP was constructed to provide the opposite results. According to its supporters, FAP kept families together and alleviated poverty through involving men in the workforce. Working under the rule of a Republican president, FAP was created to appeal both to conservatives that believed the welfare system was a failure and to liberals who wanted better care for inner city families.<sup>64</sup> To successfully do so, they “proposed to solve the welfare crisis by restructuring the welfare system to promote the formation and maintenance of male-breadwinner households.”<sup>65</sup> This plan assumed that targeting the male breadwinner would keep families together and therefore reduce the amount of money the federal government spent on welfare.

On one hand, the Nixon administration was challenging black family structure through a lens of welfare reform. Simultaneously, Nixon started a War on Drugs in the United States with the goal of criminalizing and disrupting black and hippie communities as well as their leaders.<sup>66</sup> Congress passed the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, and Nixon declared “drug abuse” as the number one public enemy in 1971. Breaking up the black and hippie communities was disguised as a drug problem. However, the ability to arrest these groups for drug charges disenfranchised their communities and created a negative public image surrounding their lifestyles. The War on Drugs during Nixon’s administration led to heightened incarceration rates, and the criminalization of black bodies continued throughout the Reagan administration of the 1980s and into present day.

The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act proposed in 1975 by Senator Edward Kennedy is “officially” when teenage pregnancy became seen as a social problem in the

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>66</sup> Lopez, German. *Nixon Official: Real Reason for the Drug War Was to Criminalize Black People and Hippies*. (Vox, 2016).

United States, as opposed to single mothers.<sup>67</sup> Kennedy's argument was centered on teenage pregnancies as the "leading cause of school dropout, familial disruption, and increasing dependency on welfare and other community resources."<sup>68</sup> Up until this point, the right was concerned with single mothers who did not have a male breadwinner as the head of their households. Linda Gordon states that "teenage pregnancy often becomes a rhetorical surrogate for a more general 1980s discourse about single mothers, welfare, and the 'underclass.'"<sup>69</sup> In other words, teenage motherhood became a scapegoat encompassing all the previous problems the social conservatives had with single mothers.

The Act of 1975 came after the monumental *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973, which brought women's bodies and right to choose to the forefront of conversation—directly challenging the right's religiously-affiliated support base. Women's issues were brought to the forefront as the Supreme Court voted on a women's right to access abortion services.<sup>70</sup> As mentioned with Nixon's campaign strategies, the attack on abortion access and women's privacy was a state government issue until taken to the federal government in the Supreme Court. States had the right to regulate women's bodies through limiting the legal health care service of abortions. Importantly, this issue drew opinions from liberals who believed that women deserve to control their own bodies and from the religious right that believed women should raise children and remain in the domestic sphere. However, it is noted in a larger context, that abortion is part of a larger conversation about women's sexual choices. Not only did this apply to women who were already married with children, the court case also applied to young, teenage-aged

---

<sup>67</sup> Luker.71.

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Senate, *The Adolescent School-Age Mother and Child Care Act*, 94th Congress, Senate Report no. 29, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon, Linda. *Pitied but not entitled: Single mothers and the history of welfare*. (New York: Free Press, 1994): 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "*Roe v. Wade*," <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Roe-v-Wade/125053>.

women who were becoming pregnant at a young age, out-of-wedlock, and often without the support of a male breadwinner.

Once *Roe v. Wade* was decided, along with the war on drugs and welfare reform that happened under Nixon's administration, Republican conservatism continued to gain popularity leading up to and throughout the 1980s under President Reagan. Reagan was a strong proponent of the free market and successfully implemented policies based on supply-side economics and laissez-faire philosophy, which became known as "Reaganomics."<sup>71</sup> One early example of Reaganomics was the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981 that was enacted to "encourage economic growth through reductions in individual income tax rates and the expensing of depreciable property."<sup>72</sup> Tax breaks were a way for Reagan to decrease monies for federally funded programs like welfare and other social assistantships.

Reagan used several tactics to solidify his support for smaller government and less federal spending. He argued that tax cuts would honor families, which were the "moral core" of the United States. However, the tax cuts were actually designed to help the rich get richer. The incentive for middle-class white Americans was that their nuclear families would not be challenged by other familial styles, such as the matriarchal black, inner city families described in the *Moynihan Report*. Reagan's political strategy included taking conservative stances on "hot-button issues" such as abortion.<sup>73</sup> This conservative stance appealed to Evangelical Christians because, from their perspective, *Roe v. Wade* was a major setback to the type of values they believed the United States should embrace. While they were unable to reverse the Supreme

---

<sup>71</sup> Black, John, Nigar Hashimzade, and Gareth Myles. "Reaganomics." In *A Dictionary of Economics*. : Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Black, John, Nigar Hashimzade, and Gareth Myles. "Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981." In *A Dictionary of Economics*. : Oxford University Press.,2017.

<sup>73</sup> Luker, 76.

Court decision, conservatives were able to pass restrictions on governmental supported abortions.

As for Reagan's stance on law and order, the war on drugs was another "hot-button issue" that garnered support from the right. Nonviolent drug law offenses increased from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997.<sup>74</sup> Most of the increasingly incarcerated persons were from the black and hippie communities, which were the targets of Nixon's war on drugs. Helping Reagan with this drastic campaign was his wife, First Lady Nancy Reagan, who created an advertising campaign called "Just Say No." The campaign targeted young children and warned them of the harmful effects of drugs, and most importantly that drug use and possession was a jailable offense that would ruin their bright futures. Most importantly, the campaign painted drug users and sellers as inherently bad and distorted the reality of the right's political agenda. Drug regulation was another attack on the black families living in the inner cities who relied on welfare because those were the areas targeted by these campaigns.

## **Methodology**

*What does it mean to do intimate ethnographic research with family members? What are the limitations? What are the benefits?*

I specifically chose to conduct my research in an intimate, familial setting. Not out of convenience or ease—the process of analyzing family stories and experiences is arduous and can be quite frustrating. However, it is also enlightening, joyous, and brings me a sense of fulfillment. Through conducting oral histories and interviews with my mother and grandmother, I learned about teenage motherhood at large and also gained a deeper respect and understanding for my family. Choosing to do this project with them placed my individual identity at a

---

<sup>74</sup> "A Brief History of the Drug War." Drug Policy Alliance. <http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war>.

crossroad. In the words of intimate ethnographer Alisse Waterston, “I am a daughter who chronicled a family narrative, and I am an anthropologist who contextualized the story.”<sup>75</sup> This research project is for me and my family, but also for the audience who decides to read this paper with aim to re-contextualize teenage motherhood. I weave the personal experiences of my mother and grandmother, along with my own knowledge of these events, in order to make the larger narrative of teenage pregnancy personal. By doing this, I aim to provide an alternative perspective to the negative connotations associated with adolescent motherhood.

In their simplest form, interviews and oral histories are innately collaborative. This type of research design requires understanding, comfortability, and familiarity between interviewer and narrator. The narrator shares personal, emotive information about their lived experiences with a trust that the interviewer will use their story relatively, without distorting their opinions. Coming to the table for this type of interaction requires preparation, and in my research, I sought a collaborative environment that gave the narrators, my mother and my grandmother, autonomy over the information they shared. On one hand, they are retelling stories to their (grand)daughter that she’s heard a million and one times. On the other, there is an added layer of stress and formality generated through the understanding that these stories are not just told in a one-off setting. Rather, we are engaging in a type of information-telling that entails documentation of these age-old family stories that I will then retell in an academic setting that picks apart and examines them.

I turn to collaborative oral history settings and feminist ethnography methodologies for guidance in producing this type of research, as I grappled immensely with questions about how to appropriately begin and execute this process. When referring to feminist ethnography,

---

<sup>75</sup> Waterston, Alisse. *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014: XV

anthropologists Davis and Cravens, assert that it is “particularly important to draw inspiration from both our intellectual genealogy and our feminist sensibility that comes from critical and meaningful engagement with fieldwork.”<sup>76</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I am employing ethnographic methods, with feminist and collaborative interventions, to place the stories of my family into a larger conversation about American culture surrounding teenage motherhood. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack argue that interviews “preserve a living interchange for present and future use,” which means we can “rummage through interviews like we do an old attic—probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting our results.”<sup>77</sup> Going through this process of documenting someone’s experiences for present and future use allows us to “highlight particular points of view and center our accounts on matters that we find meaningful.”<sup>78</sup> On this point, I follow scholars, such as Luttrell, Silver, and Erdmans and Black, urging the continuation of centering the experiences of teenage mothers who are often not listened to.

### **Teenage Motherhood in Indiana**

Based on my grandmother’s knowledge, her entire family has lived in Indiana for as long as her records can trace generations before her. I spent the first 23 years of my life living in Indiana, and 18 of those years in our small city about an hour northeast of Indianapolis, the state’s capital. Growing up, I had a hard time grappling with my complex relationship to teenage motherhood. It was normal in my families and some of the other families in our community.

Other daughters of teenage mothers and I always seemed to find each other at school and form a

---

<sup>76</sup> Davis, Dana-Ain, and Christa Craven. *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016: 126.

<sup>77</sup> Berger Gluck, Sherna, and Daphne Patai, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991: 11.

<sup>78</sup> Davis and Cravens, 126.

friendship based on our common experiences. Other students, whose mother did not birth them in their teen years, would respond with shock when they found out my mother was at least 10 years younger than their own. On one hand, it was simply seen as how things were. On the other hand, negative assumptions were made by the general community about the circumstances il6n which I was raised.

As of 2017, Indiana ranks the 12<sup>th</sup> in the United States for the highest teenage birth rate. This equates to about 23 births per 1000 pregnant teenagers aged 15 to 19.<sup>79</sup>

While exact statistics about the county in which I grew up in are not available, it's been established that "rural adolescents experience inequalities in teen pregnancy."<sup>80</sup>

SAVI, an online digital statistics

tool powered by Indiana University, provides information by counties in Indiana about health outcomes, living conditions, and social inequality.<sup>81</sup> From SAVI's database about Madison

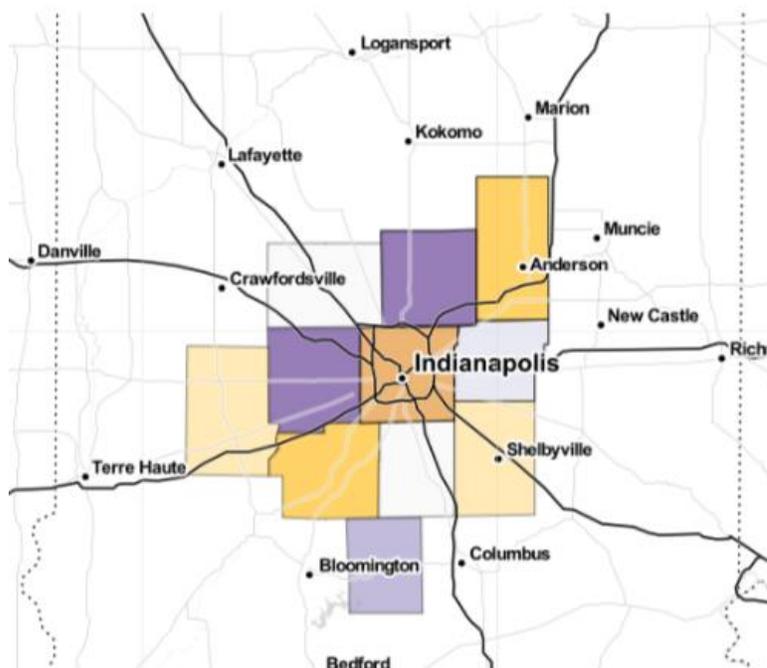


Figure 1 Map of Indiana (SAVI.org). Madison County is the most northeastern county listed on the map, which includes the city of Anderson.

<sup>79</sup> "Stats of the State of Indiana." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 11, 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/indiana/indiana.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> Leroy-Melamed, Maayan, MD, Devon Hensel, MS, PhD, Allison K. Muzzey, BA, MA, Leigh Zaban, Med, Douglas Cope-Barnes, MSW, LCSW, and Mary A. Ott, MD, MA. "Factors Associated with Intent to Have Sex or Abstain in Rural Indiana Middle School Students." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62, no. 2 (February 2018): S70.

<sup>81</sup> "About Us." SAVI. <http://www.savi.org/about-us/>.

County, where my family resides, the poverty rate is 17 percent, which is higher than Indiana's poverty rate as a whole.<sup>82</sup>

Conservative legislation has continually been pushed at the state-level in Indiana, which have mainly targeted abortion providers. According to the Guttmacher Institute, Indiana restricts public funding for family planning, which affects public health concerns, reproductive health education, and abortion access.<sup>83</sup> An example, provided by the Guttmacher Institute, notes that Indiana only allows minors to access contraceptives without parental involvement if the minor is married.<sup>84</sup> As of March 2019, the state is pushing for legislation that allows parents to opt their children out of sex education in school.<sup>85</sup> Yet, Indiana still permits abstinence only education in schools, which means many youths are not gaining access to knowledge about birth control, contraceptives, or healthy sexual relationships.<sup>86</sup> These conservative attempts to restrict education and access to reproductive health, paired with the statistics from SAVI's database, shows that teenagers in Indiana are at high risk of becoming pregnant at a young age while simultaneously not given resources to make informed decisions about their sexual health and wellbeing.

## **Discussion & Interviews**

### *Interview with my mother*

---

<sup>82</sup> "Madison County: Health Profile." SAVI Topics Profiles.  
<http://profiles.savi.org/topics/dashboard.html?TOPICID=1000080>.

<sup>83</sup> "State Family Planning Funding Restrictions." Guttmacher Institute. April 24, 2019.  
<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-family-planning-funding-restrictions>.

<sup>84</sup> "Minors' Access to Contraceptive Services." Guttmacher Institute. April 01, 2019.  
<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/minors-access-contraceptive-services>.

<sup>85</sup> Herron, Arika. "Schools Won't Be Able to Teach Sex Ed without Parent 'OK'." Indianapolis Star. January 31, 2018. <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2018/01/30/schools-wont-able-teach-sex-ed-without-parent-ok/1075062001/>.

<sup>86</sup> Hernandez, Nicole. "New Indiana Law Aims to Draw the Line on Sex Education, Making Parents Decide." 13 WTHR Indianapolis. June 28, 2018. <https://www.wthr.com/article/new-indiana-law-aims-draw-line-sex-education-making-parents-decide>.

My mother, who gave birth to me at 16 years old, documented her pregnancy with photographs. The photos range from her growing stomach fashioned in self-described dreadful 90s maternity clothes, to decorating our shared bedroom with tacky Disney-themed wallpaper and bedding, to monthly professional photos of me wearing various frilly outfits throughout my first year of life. While these visual representations of my childhood exist in photographs, the stories behind them were never documented. Occasional dates are written on the back of the CVS-printed 4x6 prints, but most remain without descriptions. In preparation for this interview, I sifted through my mother's endless photo collection—via FaceTime with my mother's assistance and my long-distance approval and interest. In the end, we settled on 3 photos that I later interviewed her about—digging for more details about the experiences and events that unfolded over the course of and after her pregnancy.

My opening interview questions about each photograph were basic and topical: “Where was this photo taken? Who took it? Why was the photo taken? What happened that day?” As my mother began filling in the gaps between narrative and image, more questions started flooding my mind. A linkable story started to form—even though my mother talked about all of the events out of order and in various contexts. Stories I had never been told became the center of our conversation. The information I was given during our interviews shifted the way I piece together the confusing, secretive backstory of my early childhood. My curiosity took the forefront for some parts of the interview as I noticed that talking about the photos, materials from my mother's time as a teenage mother, unearthed information I would not have gained access to by simply asking topical interview questions. I learned quite quickly that discontinuities between my mother's and grandmother's stories were frequent, wildly different, and puzzling to think through even though they were both recalling the same events. In essence, I am telling my



*Figure 2 My mother while pregnant at the local bowling alley, 1994.*

mother's and my grandmother's story, but I could not do that without my previous knowledge and experiences of growing up with her as well as the conversation sparked from the photographs we discussed.

The year was 1994. My mother was a junior in high school, a talented member of the volleyball team, and dating another student, who was also a junior and would eventually become my biological father. That autumn, my mother's period was 3 weeks late. She had been having unprotected sex and was not on birth control pills—even though she tried

to get them from her doctor, who advised she try abstinence instead. Her older sister had a feeling that my mother was pregnant and invited my mother to visit her apartment, near the hospital at which my aunt was a Registered Nurse, to take a pregnancy test. In my mother's words, "the stick turned pink instantly, and in that moment I knew I wanted to keep the baby—you." They drove back to home together so my mother could tell Mams that she was pregnant. My grandma's response, through tears, was "I thought so." Mams told my grandfather, and he immediately acknowledged that my mom had to make the decision about what to do with the child. They were willing to help raise the child as long as my mother promised to complete college while living at home, take care of and work to provide for me, and decide against marrying my biological father.



*Figure 3 My mother holding me as an infant the first time I held my own bottle.*

All of the details here were relayed to me as fact. By fact, I mean that if you were to ask any of the people involved in the events of that day, their answers follow this strict script. We went through this routine baseline explanation at the beginning of our interview when I asked about Figure 1, which I found out was my mother at her junior year post-prom at the town's local bowling alley. She was 7 months pregnant and wearing her mother's oversized cardigan because,

“maternity clothes in the 90s were so horrible!

You have no idea.”<sup>87</sup> Mom and my biological

father went to prom alone, which was separate from mom's group of cheerleading friends. When two of her friend's parents found out she was pregnant, the parents instantaneously put a ban on their daughter's friendship with my mother. They did not want my mother's “bad influence” to have any effect on their daughters, who both became pregnant within the next year—marrying the baby's biological fathers and eventually divorcing them.

Figure 2 was taken roughly a week after we arrived home. My grandmother took this photo in our kitchen, and it was the first time I held my own bottle. Breastfeeding was diligently in my mother's plan from the beginning stages of her pregnancy. However, the epidural disrupted the intended plan and proved to make breastfeeding quite difficult. In my mother's words, “oh gosh, the epidural had the same effects on you as it did me! You had no idea what

---

<sup>87</sup> "Interview with My Mother." Telephone interview by author. May 1, 2018.

was going on and would not latch on for anything.”<sup>88</sup> When my mother started her senior year at Madison Heights High School, which was located across the street from their home, the principal granted her permission to visit home over lunch period to breastfeed. Some of her teachers even excused her from class when she needed to pump.

These stories are unique to my family’s experiences, but my mother’s pregnancy can speak to a larger narrative of young mothers. As the story behind the prom photo suggests, parents of high school-aged daughters were concerned about pregnancy. However, abstinence was the main “solution” instead of various preventive birth control methods. Marriage was always a conversation when one of these young women became pregnant, and as my mom’s story and her friend’s stories suggest, families view marriage differently in relation to young pregnancy. Both my grandmother and my mother believe, and least viewing the situation in hindsight, that marrying my biological father would have been a huge mistake. My mother had complications with her first birth that would later effect how she chose to give birth to my two younger brothers—one with a doula, the other with a midwife. No longer did she trust the hospitals to care for her and her newborn child properly. She had the luxury of a school administration that took her role as mother and her role as student as equally seriously and important, which is not always the case.

*Interview with my grandmother*

She was a good mom. I mean, she never gave us away. I don't know if she knew she could, could have, but she never gave us away. And she loved us. But she was a kid raising kids.<sup>89</sup>

My grandmother, in one of our interviews when asked about what it was like being raised by a teenage mother, touched on the 2 options she believed her mother had when she became

---

<sup>88</sup> "Interview with My Mother." Telephone interview by author. May 1, 2018.

<sup>89</sup> "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. 2018.

pregnant at 13: adoption or parenting. She could keep her children, or choose to give them away. My great grandmother dropped out of middle school around the time she became pregnant to get a job as a waitress at a local diner restaurant. Eventually she started working at a department store, as manager of the men's department. Her soon-to-be husband, my great grandfather, worked at a local bakery throughout my grandmother's childhood years and later got a job at the local automotive factory. Together they had 3 children.

One spring afternoon, she decided to show me around her hometown and all the places she used to spend time. We went by her childhood home, the local ice cream shop that someone in her family owns, the tomato fields, and the old building that used to be where the bakery her dad used to work at:

When I was real little, dad worked for a bakery here. He made bread and he always smelled good when he came home because he smelled like bread. That was even when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade because I remember when I got my tonsils out. Mom took me downtown, and we went to the bakery. You could just smell that yeast. He had on his white pants and his white t-shirt.<sup>90</sup>

From this visit, I learned many details about my grandmother's childhood that I otherwise would not have known. Visiting the old bakery brought up memories about the family dynamics she experienced as a young child.

They were never a very affectionate family—my great grandparents alternated sleeping on the couch, the 3 children grew up to hardly speak to one another, and there were seldom emotional exchanges at home. My great grandmother made many sacrifices for her children, even if she did not outwardly express her love towards them.

I thought she was hard on me. I think, as I look back, I think she was stricter on me than the boys. Because, being a female, ya know. It's harder. And I don't think she wanted me to do the things she did. I think she was trying to protect me. See, she didn't want me to come home pregnant at a young age. I remember her saying, be a kid as long as you can

---

<sup>90</sup> "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. 2018.

because once you're grown up, you're grown up forever. [...] but she was stricter on me than the boys. I think it was because I was a girl. She didn't want me to go through what she went through as far as being a young mom. That's what I think.<sup>91</sup>

In this regard, her mom was trying to protect my grandmother by making sure she did not make the same 'mistakes' that she did in her life. Her mother's notion of staying a kid as long as possible implies that she probably thought her childhood was cut short because she became a young mother. In my grandmother's words, "she was a kid raising kids," which means she had to grow up at a young age. By the time my grandmother had started raising her daughters, she had made slightly different life choices than her mother. She had gotten married at 18, before graduating high school, and soon after got pregnant with her first child.

My grandmother wanted her daughters to have more success in school than she had growing up. It was not feasible for my grandmother to consider going to college, and it made more sense for her to get married. In response to me asking how her mother felt about her getting married at 18, my grandmother responded:

She was okay with me getting married. She knew I wasn't going to go onto college. First of all, I didn't do well in school. Mom and dad didn't have the money for me to go off to college. I probably could have gotten grants if I had applied myself in school, if I had been smarter and listened better, I would have known that I could apply for grants or whatever. But mom and dad didn't even know how to do all that. So I guess they just assumed. It was a different time, so they just assumed that once we turned 18 that we'd be out on our own, working, and trying to survive.<sup>92</sup>

In this response, she alludes to several themes that changed over the course of her life. While she was never able to pursue a college education, her second marriage was to a man with a graduate degree. She went from growing up in a working class family to marrying someone easily situated in the middle class. So, when she was raising her children, she did not necessarily expect them to

---

<sup>91</sup> "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. 2018.

<sup>92</sup> "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. 2018.

be out of the house at 18 making their own living. The family, as a whole, had enough disposable income to relax this rule and provide extra support to their children growing up.

### *Discussion*

By using the material world as an entry point into my mother's and grandmother's memory, I began to engage with teenage motherhood from a new perspective. My mother's stories came to life through her stories, and my grandmother's stories came to life by visiting the locations she remembered from her childhood. When analyzing their experiences through memories associated with the material world, it becomes clear that "artefacts are the only class of historic event that occurred in the past but survive into the present."<sup>93</sup> My mother and my grandmother both shared their identities through their stories as well as participated social reproduction that shapes our culture.<sup>94</sup> Adding the element of material into my analysis highlights the role material plays in the culture of teenage motherhood. The negative assumptions perpetuated about young mother's experiences are based on persuasive rhetoric of social conservatives, which is not based on lived realities. Such accounts negate the circumstances and stories experienced by young mothers.

### **Conclusion**

Teenage motherhood is not a new occurrence in the United States, yet they are continually used as a scapegoat by social conservatives arguing for smaller government, bigger tax cuts, and a return to the nuclear family. Research must continue centering the experiences of young mothers to highlight the diversity of experiences and perspectives they have of their situations. Based on their stories, action must be taken to alter public policies that affect the type of assistance teenage mothers receive, which includes shifting how they are discussed in politics

---

<sup>93</sup> Jones, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 5.

and in daily life. Right now in Indiana, for example, reproductive justice is under attack by allowing parents to opt their children out of sexual education. Such legislation hindering young people is being enacted across the county. In order to change the narrative as well as the services available, we have to uplift teenage mother's voices. From this perspective, it becomes impossible to discuss young mothers without hearing them, listening to them, and centering their experiences.

## Bibliography

"A Brief History of the Drug War." Drug Policy Alliance.

<http://www.drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war>.

"About Us." SAVI. <http://www.savi.org/about-us/>.

Barcelos, Christie A., and Aline C. Gubrium. "Reproducing Stories: Strategic Narratives of Teen Pregnancy and Motherhood." *Social Problems* 61, no. 3 (August 2014): 466-81.

doi:10.1525/sp.2014.12241.

Berger Gluck, Sherna, and Daphne Patai, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991.

Boonstra, Heather D. "Teen Pregnancy: Trends And Lessons Learned." *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 7-10.

Black, John, Nigar Hashimzade, and Gareth Myles. *A Dictionary of Economics*. 5th ed. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Briggs, Laura. *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.

*Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Roe v. Wade," <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Roe-v-Wade/125053>.

Brown, Frank. "Nixons "Southern Strategy" and Forces against Brown." *The Journal of Negro Education* 73, no. 3 (2004). doi:10.2307/4129605.

Chappell, Marisa. *War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America*. Philadelphia, PA: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

Cressman, Dale L. "The Great Silent Majority: Nixon's 1969 Speech on Vietnamization." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (September 2015): 619-20.

- Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York, NY: International Publishers, 2008.
- Davis, Dana-Ain, and Christa Craven. *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Demby, Gene. "The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original 'Welfare Queen'." NPR. December 20, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>.
- Erdmans, Mary Patrice, and Timothy Black. *On Becoming a Teen Mom: Life Before Pregnancy*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.
- Gordon, Linda. *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1994.
- Greenbaum, Susan D. *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images about Poverty*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- "Hear Our Stories." UMass Amherst. <https://www.umass.edu/hearourstories/about>.
- Hernandez, Nicole. "New Indiana Law Aims to Draw the Line on Sex Education, Making Parents Decide." 13 WTHR Indianapolis. June 28, 2018. <https://www.wthr.com/article/new-indiana-law-aims-draw-line-sex-education-making-parents-decide>.
- Herron, Arika. "Schools Won't Be Able to Teach Sex Ed without Parent 'OK'." Indianapolis Star. January 31, 2018. <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2018/01/30/schools-wont-able-teach-sex-ed-without-parent-ok/1075062001/>.
- "Interview with My Grandmother." Facetime interview by author. March 12, 2018.
- "Interview with My Mother." Telephone interview by author. May 1, 2018.

- Jones, Andrew. *Memory and Material Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Kail, Ben Lennox, and Marc Dixon. "The Uneven Patterning of Welfare Benefits at the Twilight of AFDC: Assessing the Influence of Institutions, Race, and Citizen Preferences." *Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2011): 376-99. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2011.01211.x.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." Speech, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.
- Lassiter, Matthew D. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Leroy-Melamed, Maayan, MD, Devon Hensel, MS, PhD, Allison K. Muzzey, BA, MA, Leigh Zaban, MD, Douglas Cope-Barnes, MSW, LCSW, and Mary A. Ott, MD, MA. "Factors Associated with Intent to Have Sex or Abstain in Rural Indiana Middle School Students." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62, no. 2 (February 2018). doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.11.142.
- Lopez, German. "Nixon Official: Real Reason for the Drug War Was to Criminalize Black People and Hippies." Vox. March 23, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/22/11278760/war-on-drugs-racism-nixon>.
- Luker, Kristin. *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996.
- Luttrell, Wendy. *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

"Madison County: Health Profile." SAVI Topics Profiles.

<http://profiles.savi.org/topics/dashboard.html?TOPICID=1000080>.

Martin, Joyce A., M.P.H., Brady E. Hamilton, Ph.D., Michelle J.K. Osterman, M.H.S., Anne K. Driscoll, Ph.D., and Patrick Drake, M.S. "Births Final Data for 2016." *National Vital Statistics Reports* 67, no. 1 (January 31, 2018): 1-55.

"Minors' Access to Contraceptive Services." Guttmacher Institute. April 01, 2019.

<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/minors-access-contraceptive-services>.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965.

Schaefer, Richard T. *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. Vol. 1. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008.

"Silent Majority." Cambridge Dictionary.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/silent-majority>.

Silver, Lauren J. *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Skinner, CW. "Coard Raps Nixon's States Rights Plans." *Bay State Banner* VI, no. 20 (January 28, 1971).

Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64. doi:10.2307/464747.

Stacey, Judith. *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late- Twentieth-century America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

"State Family Planning Funding Restrictions." Guttmacher Institute. April 24, 2019.

<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-family-planning-funding-restrictions>.

"Stats of the State of Indiana." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 11, 2018.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/indiana/indiana.htm>.

U.S. Congress. Senate. *The Adolescent School-Age Mother and Child Care Act*. By Edward Kennedy. 94th Cong., 1st sess. S. Rept. 4.

Waterston, Alisse. *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

White House Working Group on the Family. *The Family, Preserving America's Future : A Report of the Working Group on the Family*. 1986.

Wilcox, Clyde, and Carin Robinson. *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

Zeit, Joshua. *Building the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*. London, UK: Penguin Publishing Group, 2018.