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“HONEY, I AM HISTORY:”
THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ONNIE LEE LOGAN, ALABAMA MIDWIFE

Kathryn Leigh Brantley

May 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Women’s and Gender History
Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

This thesis explores the life of Onnie Lee Logan, an Alabama midwife, through the lenses of race, gender, and religion. I examine *Motherwit*, Logan's autobiography as told to author Katherine Clark, and use secondary sources to analyze Mrs. Logan's activism as evidenced in her text. In addition to exploring Mrs. Logan's activism, I also examine the legacy she left behind in Mobile County, Alabama following the revocation of her midwifery license by the state of Alabama in the 1980s. Through a close read of *Motherwit*, readers can gain insight into Logan's resistance to white supremacy and the coercive intimacy she encountered throughout her life; her understanding of gender and her progressive traditionalist views; and the role of religion and how it shaped her worldview. I also examine infant and maternal mortality rates in Mobile County, and how these rates can be seen as connected to the loss of midwives like Logan. By interviewing women in Alabama who had illegal homebirths, as well as Katherine Clark, the author who assisted Logan in writing her autobiography, a vision of the current state of birth in Alabama unfolds alongside a deeper understanding of Logan's life and experiences.

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*So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.
Exodus 1:20¹*

On July 11, 1995, a bright, scorching hot day in Mobile, Alabama, a woman passed away quietly. Survived by her husband, a son, a sister, six grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren, the death of Onnie Lee Logan, midwife and housekeeper, would not seem to be a great matter of state. The death of Mrs. Logan was not mourned quietly. Instead, her obituary was printed in the pages of the *New York Times*, a far cry from her city's *Mobile Press Register*. Thousands of people opened their papers on Thursday, July 13, 1995,² to see the story of Onnie Lee Logan's life in print, her death memorialized, her legacy cemented. Her story was not lost.

Logan spent most of her life as one of many state-licensed midwives employed for decades by the state of Alabama. Logan, and other midwives like her, served rural communities who did not have access to obstetrical services. These communities, overwhelmingly made up of black families, traditionally relied on midwives as their sole form of birth assistance.³ Many midwives served these communities diligently and arguably had just as many tales to tell as Logan did. However, their unique stories and experiences died with them, passed down only in family histories and oral traditions unknown to the public at large. In contrast, Logan's stories were preserved in print, her obituary published in the *New York Times*, and her life memorialized in the midwifery community. While Logan passed almost 25 years ago, her life has proven to be immortal, and her "God-given motherwit" will continue to be studied for years to come by

¹ Exodus 1:20

² Robert Mcg. Thomas Jr., "Onnie Lee Logan, 85, Midwife Whose 'Motherwit' Drew Praise." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, July 13, 1995. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/13/obituaries/onnie-lee-logan-85-midwife-whose-motherwit-drew-praise.html>.

³ Jenny M. Luke, *Delivered by Midwives: African American Midwifery in the Twentieth-Century South*. (JACKSON: University Press of Mississippi, 2018) 59.

incredibly diverse groups of individuals. Unlike many of her peers, her story did not end in the quiet, whitewashed halls of the Mobile Infirmary.

Logan's introduction to midwifery began early in life. She watched her mother assist members of their community give birth and listened to the stories that her paternal grandmother, also a community midwife, passed down. Midwifery, babies, and pregnancy were in Logan's blood. As a tiny girl, Logan began accompanying her mother to births, peeking through cracks in walls to desperately try and see what was happening in those forbidden rooms. She played at being a doctor, practicing on her baby dolls, and pretended to be a nurse. Although her mother tried to shield her from the sexual details of reproduction, she began to allow her to witness the realities and complexities of childbirth at an early age.⁴

Logan was a state-licensed midwife and received training and oversight from state regulatory boards.⁵ Her mother and grandmother were both midwives as well, but not state trained. Referred to as "lay midwives" today, these midwives learned from apprenticeships and observations instead of in a formal educational setting. This type of midwifery was, for many years, the most common type of birth worker available in rural areas of states such as Alabama. Like Logan's mother and grandmother, they learned through observing other women, by apprenticing with existing midwives, and by attending births in their communities, eventually moving on to practicing by themselves instead of accompanying a more experienced midwife.

By the time Logan was facilitating births, Alabama was introducing more stringent oversight on the practice of lay midwifery and had established a state regulatory board in order to train and oversee midwives. This increased regulation was introduced to provide a consistent standard of care along with a more educated and professional fleet of state midwives. State

⁴ Onnie Lee Logan, *Motherwit: An Alabama Midwives Story*, (S.I.: Untreed Reads, 2013) 52.

⁵ Logan, *Motherwit*, iv.

midwives would replace lay midwives, who were considered by the medical community at large to be uneducated and dangerous.⁶ In 1918, the Alabama Legislature established a law that required all midwives to pass an examination, as well as to register with the State Board of Health. This prompted the Andrew Memorial Hospital in Tuskegee to offer training to Alabama's black midwives.⁷ Similar to other parts of the country, in the earliest years of the Alabama's existence, midwives or family members assisted the majority of childbearing women no matter their race. By the 20th century most midwives, and women attended by midwives, were black women. A tiny percentage of more rural and impoverished white women also accessed midwifery care; however, as mentioned in the later pages of Logan's autobiography, this could lead to trouble.⁸

Researching the life of Onnie Lee Logan inevitably leads to researching the subject of midwifery in the state of Alabama. Midwifery originated as folk medicine and just as birth itself has, has existed in every culture. Politics, race, and gender have always been present in its practice. In the United States, midwifery was practiced from the inception of the country, and despite its changed form, is still practiced today. In Alabama, at the beginning of the 20th century, midwifery was almost exclusively the work of black women in the most impoverished and rural parts of the state. It was reborn in the later parts of the 20th century and early 21st as something more accessible to religious and more affluent white women. In all its incarnations, midwifery has been viewed by some as a dangerous, outdated practice that should be eradicated, and by others as a safe and necessary option that preserves personal preference and freedom.

⁶ Polly F. Radosh, "Midwives in the United States: Past and Present," *Population Research and Policy Review* 5, no. 2 (1986): 129-46. Accessed May 7, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/40229820.

⁷ Stacey A. Tovino, "American Midwifery Litigation and State Legislative Preferences for Physician-Controlled Childbirth" (2004). *Scholarly Works*. p. 394 <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/394>

⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, Pg. 178.

The way that historians discuss the subject of midwifery in Alabama is varied. Historians of state and general history tend to gloss over the subject at best or to ignore it completely at worst. Others, particularly women's historians and scholars of medical history, delve more deeply into the topic. Writing about midwifery in Alabama is often narrow, with the bulk of authors focusing on first-person narratives and biographies of black Alabama midwives. Of these niche histories, even fewer cover Logan specifically.

In 1984, Logan recorded an oral history that eventually became *Motherwit*. In the pages of her autobiography, Logan speaks frankly, colorfully, and beautifully about her life. *Motherwit* begins with an introduction by Katherine Clark, a white Alabama author who also transcribed Logan's oral history.⁹ In *Motherwit*, Clark transcribed Logan's oral history verbatim, preserving not only Logan's story but also her language and accent. In the foreword and epilogue of *Motherwit*, Clark provides a foundation for Logan's stories and elaborates on what drove Logan to share her stories.

Onnie always regarded midwifery as her real life's work, however, and the inspiration for this project came not from me, but from her overwhelming desire 'not to die with it,' as she said - not to die without sharing the 'wisdom and knowledge' but from especially the stories from her lifetime of experience.¹⁰

Significantly, Clark let the reader know that the "inspiration" and "overwhelming desire" as well as the experience, was Logan's. It is from her self-proclaimed and well-earned wisdom and knowledge that Logan's stories flow. Clark thus acknowledges, implicitly, that the reader might think otherwise, and checks that thought from the beginning. This is Logan's story, even if the framing is Clark's.

⁹ Carla Jean Whitley, "Biographer Katherine Clark Makes the Switch to Novels," AL.com, September 02, 2015, accessed July 30, 2018, https://www.al.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2015/09/biographer_katherine_clark_mak.html.

¹⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, i.

The love that Logan had for her clients, their babies and her community is evident in every page of her memoir. Yet instead of focusing on Logan's career, *Motherwit* chronicles her entire life. Logan spares no details in what she shares. She speaks of the meals her family ate; the way her father's hair laid straight with "just a lil oil in it;"¹¹ the animals that they raised; and the love her father had for Mardi Gras. Small details of family life, stories of her siblings and their families, and personal musings abound. By including such intense exposition about herself, and the way she lived before she was a midwife, Logan forces her readers to acknowledge her as not just a subject to be studied, or a midwife with a story to tell, but as a human being with parents, siblings, and a personal story.

Logan's career as a midwife was so much of her core identity that it is hard to determine just when her story of how she became a midwife begins. When Logan explains her family history, she slips into her midwifery perspective. During a tale about her brother Elmer, for example, she begins to tell stories of the births of her nieces and nephews:

Now he was the one when my sister-in-law was havin the babies we used to peek through the crack. That was his wife. I musta been around nine. About nine at the time. I can remember things that happened then. My mother would have killed me if she would have known. Mother would never let us in... My mother was deliverin the baby. We were in the other room in the bed, and me, lil nosy, go'n get up and peek through the crack.¹²

Beginning in spirals, streaking through her personal history, Logan threads midwifery more and more into her story, increasing with her age. Babies, birth, and midwifery become the most robust theme of her life, and Logan finds a way to relate almost every happening in her life back to birth. She speaks plainly of all aspects of pregnancy, listing miscarriages along with births, speaking of the horrors that awaited white women who unexpectedly produced black babies, and

¹¹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 1.

¹² *Ibid*, 52.

the darker horrors that faced the black men who fathered them. Logan tells stories of babies born from incest and violence, and how she reacted to knowing that the men who perpetuated that violence on the girls she helped through childbirth were most likely do so again. Logan speaks birth like she speaks her stories in general, and she never avoids the more wrenching portions of those stories.

Throughout *Motherwit*, Logan uses terminology that is not commonly used today, or that is not used outside of the medical community. I will be providing footnotes and explanations whenever necessary. The two main terms that appear within *Motherwit* are “grand midwives” and “granny midwives.” While state licensed midwives were not officially known by these terms, these names were commonly used amongst the general populace, and seeped into common vernacular. The term “granny midwife” was particularly common. “In a black community like the one Onnie grew up in, your granny, or ‘grannymother,’ was the woman who had delivered you and first put her hands on you. Later, ‘granny’ became part of the official term for lay midwives who had no medical training.”¹³ While these terms, especially “granny midwife,” can appear at first glance to be degrading or minimizing, there was by all accounts a great deal of respect behind them.

While her own memoir is the most comprehensive source of information on her life, several historians discuss Onnie Lee Logan. Among these historians is Jessica Mitford, in her text *The American Way of Birth*. Mitford uses Logan’s story in reference to the decline and eventual criminalization of midwifery in the state of Alabama and discusses Logan’s¹⁴ theory on why midwifery was criminalized.

¹³ Logan, *Motherwit*, xii.

¹⁴ Mitford refers to Logan as “Ms.” I will refer to her as either Logan or Mrs. Logan throughout this text. In the south, where both Logan and myself are from, an older married woman such as Mrs. Logan would never be referred to by her first name by strangers, and likely would not have been referred to as a “Ms.” or “Miss” either.

Ms. Logan may have put her finger on one important reason for the medical profession's campaign against the grannies. As long as she was attending poor black women, she said, the doctors didn't care. But after she started delivering white girls - "nice, outstanding white girls, then that's when they started complaining. Said I was taking their money. In fact that's what they said. My patients have come and told me that's what the doctors said."¹⁵

This frank discussion of the attitudes held towards "granny" midwives in Alabama is one that few historians of midwifery cover. Mitford, however, fully acknowledges this, and also takes time to discuss the "deplorable history of the Deep South in the 1930s."¹⁶ Mitford does not shy away from discussing the lynchings and other horrors that African-Americans in Alabama (and the United States at large) experienced. This history is also one that Logan herself addresses extensively in her autobiography.

The systemic racism that faced black citizens in Alabama influenced every aspect of life, including midwifery. Historian Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, in her 2000 book *African American Midwifery in the South: Dialogues of Birth, Race, and Memory*, touches on how midwifery was influenced by racism. In her work, Fraser analyzes the systematic edging out of black midwives in southern states, including Alabama. Fraser uses evidence pulled from first-person dialogues, data from public health officials, and examples of state legislatures to document the process by which traditional practicing midwives were brought under state supervisory control, and, through that process, were gradually eliminated altogether. In the text, Fraser also mentions, like Mitford, Onnie Lee Logan, using her story as an example of how racial biases affected midwives like her.

When Miss Onnie Logan, the Alabama midwife mentioned earlier, insists on the truth of everything in her book, she is taking action to give voice to the past. When she decries the lack of opportunity for her to "get more learning" when she was a young woman, she is giving voice to her regrets and anger. When she keeps repeating how good white people have been to her, while offering considerable detail of the injustices of her life, she is choosing to speak and to be quiet. She is,

¹⁵ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Birth* (London: Gollancz, 1993), 174.

¹⁶ Mitford, *The American Way of Life*, 178.

in short, exercising mother wit transformed into political speech. It is up to us to hear her.¹⁷

Fraser describes how Logan acted as historian not only for herself, but for her community as well. The stories that she documents span much deeper chasms of history than delivering babies and tending to mothers in her community, no matter the importance of doing so.

Other historical texts written about Alabama history and Civil Rights history have a definite “midwife shaped hole” in their subject matter. In order to view Logan’s autobiography in a well-rounded way, these books must also be consulted. Texts like Glenn Feldman’s *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama* provide crucial background on the racial terror that Logan’s family experienced. While Logan does not hold back in telling the stories of her brothers and how they were attacked and brutalized by the KKK, she does not write of their origins, larger influence across the country, or why they operated in the way they did. Feldman’s work provides the background to these painful accounts.

While Elizabeth Hayes Turner, in her book *Women and Gender in the New South, 1865-1945*, does not mention Logan, she provides a framework regarding gender roles in the south in the era that Logan and her family lived. Logan wrote regarding the work that she and her sisters did; the type of clothes that they wore, and how they were expected to interact with men and the world at large. Using texts like Turner’s, even if she does not speak about Logan herself, helps to understand how and why Logan and her contemporaries behaved in the ways that Logan describes.

¹⁷ Gertrude Jacinta Fraser, *African American midwifery in the South: dialogues of birth, race, and memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 13.

Historian Ann Fessler, in her work *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade*, discusses at length a subject that Logan touches on in her memoir: out of wedlock births. Logan communicates in *Motherwit* the disapproval and disappointment that came along with births of babies to unwed mothers during her career. Reading Fessler's work contextualizes the social attitudes and political and religious ideologies that lent to the atmospheres Logan writes about. These texts, and many more like them, do not mention Logan by name. They write nothing of her life, her work, or how her work intersected with the subjects that they focus on. By reading into the absence of Logan's story, a larger context appears.

Logan's story is one example of the visible invisibility of midwives in histories of both Civil Rights and general Alabama history. To the trained eye, these omissions are a glaring inconsistency, the wiping out of histories of women who helped, quite literally, to birth entire generations of citizens of the American Southeast. The historians that most accurately portray Logan and Alabama midwives like her are those who practice intersectionality,¹⁸ who focus not only on Alabama history or Civil rights history, medical history or African-American history, but those who shift their kaleidoscopes a bit more, and manage to snag beautiful glimpses of the way women like Logan served their communities and then faded, seemingly, into the ether. By examining and expanding on Logan's story, these gaps can begin to be filled.

¹⁸ Intersectionality is a term developed by scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, which describes the overlapping and intersecting of different social identities, particularly as this applies to minority groups. Intersectional feminism is a movement that has developed out of this, which examines the overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression that women are put through because of their race, sex, sexuality, economic background, and other contributing factors.; Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. U.Chi.Legal F., 1989 - HeinOnline.

Logan's memoir itself is implicitly intersectional, although she would never use the word, and it is also carefully intentional. Logan does not focus on herself as only a woman, only a black citizen of early 20th century Alabama, only a Christian, or only a midwife. Instead, she acknowledges that she is a deeply multi-faceted individual by honoring all aspects of herself and honoring how these parts of herself come together to make up her as an individual. With the story of her life, Logan seeks to reinforce values that will improve her world, drawing each of these parts of herself and her understanding. If she is modest, Logan also understands her life to have a larger meaning, one that can benefit her readers. She offers them a kind of womanly nurturing, even as she criticizes racism to what she knows will be white readers. "Honey," she tells her reader, gently. "I *am* History."

It is an undertaking to turn an academic eye on a book like *Motherwit*. When Logan set out to put her story to paper, she describes how she felt called by God, quite literally, to share her experiences with the world. *Motherwit* is written in a way that feels quite intimate; it is, at its very essence, a monologue, or a conversation with her audience. As mentioned earlier, her work is a transcription of an oral history, and Katherine Clark, the white author who transcribed Logan's narration, had a personal relationship with Logan. That complicates the text – this is an older working-class black woman telling her story to a young privileged white woman – but it does not undermine it. Logan clearly comes to trust Clark, in large part, one imagines, because of the deep respect Clark shows her. Their relationship, as Clark reveals in both her introduction and her afterward, is intimate and sustained. This intimacy comes through in the way that Logan narrates. She is conversational. She jumps from subject to subject. She shares deeply intimate details about her life and the lives of her family members. The book is transcribed in a way that makes Logan's accent and ways of speaking obvious.

In analyzing this text, it is key to look not only at the text that Logan presents her audience with, but also the historical context of the stories that she tells. One cannot analyze this story without also analyzing the way she depicts racial relations in Alabama in the 20th century, her understanding of proper gender roles and how they were performed in rural communities, and her rendering of the expectations placed upon black women when they were interacting with white individuals. In one breath, Logan will discuss a recipe that her mother passed down; and in the next she will describe the way the KKK hunted down her brothers and attempted to harm them.¹⁹ Logan's text almost always flows chronologically. Since *Motherwit* is the transcription of an oral history, it reads as if she is simply relating a story to her audience. But the flow, pacing, and narration of the story should not lull any reader into believing that the stories and experiences she shares are not, literally, matters of life and death, or that the *way* she tells the story is not crucial, part of the message she wants her readers to hear.

So how did I find *Motherwit*? As a young, evangelical Christian teenager with family members who acted as birth workers in my own community, I believed midwifery to be my calling. I dreamed of owning my own birth center. Like Logan I was visibly and openly interested in birth from an early age. Beyond discussions with my own mother, who had three natural births in the early 1990s during the infancy of the resurgence of the natural birth movement, I had many discussions with a relative, involved with home birth and midwifery in many different ways. This relative was certified as a childbirth educator in the Bradley method of natural childbirth, a way of labor coaching. This relative was also one of many women who risked prosecution, scrutiny, and potential legal action in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s by choosing to rebel against the laws criminalizing home births and midwives in the state of

¹⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 32-34.

Alabama. Of her five children, three were born in illegal home births. This involved using a midwife from neighboring Mississippi who crossed the Alabama border in order to assist women with their deliveries. Frankly, she also chose to lie to government officials and doctors, claiming that her homebirths were unintentional and unintended, and that labor came on so quickly that she was unable to make it to the hospital in time to deliver with a doctor.

In addition to my experiences with my mother and relative, I grew up in a home where natural childbirth was normalized and was often a subject of discussion. This impacted the way I thought about birth and sparked my early interest in the subject. On my 15th birthday, after expressing an interest in pursuing midwifery as a career, the relative who was involved in birth work gave me a copy of *Motherwit* and a model pelvis, along with a knitted replica of a uterus, as a gift. She wanted this to help encourage my interest in studying childbirth and pregnancy. After receiving *Motherwit*, I read it as a teenager, growing more interested with every reading. I later used it many times as a resource in my undergraduate career as I began to study reproductive histories.

My original plans for thesis work here at Sarah Lawrence intended to cover a generalized history of birth in Alabama and compare birth data in counties that were traditionally served by midwives. I was curious and concerned about maternal/infant deaths in the wake of the criminalization of midwives who served the neediest women and children in these counties. Over the course of a year of study, however, it became apparent that there was much more to explore in Logan's story. Her story, in short, offers a crucial window on midwives, Alabama, race, gender, and religion.

In this thesis, I address not only the question of why a close examination of Onnie Lee Logan's life is crucial to understanding midwifery in the south today, but also how the way she

framed her life as a series of lessons to her imagine reader provides a singularly unique perspective on life as a black woman in Alabama in the 20th century.

Chapter one focuses on the way that Logan reveals the effect of racial prejudice on her life. It opens with the story of how Logan was named when a white man in her community requested that her mother name Onnie after his late wife. As a black woman growing up and living in rural Alabama, Logan reveals how race shaped every interaction that she had, whether it was in the confines of expectations placed and lessons taught by her own family, or by the wider social sphere ruling Alabama during the early and mid-20th century. In her work Logan suggests that race relations had a gendered component: for black men, it often revolved around conflict and violence, for women (and sometimes men) the coercion was through a kind of intimacy, and yet Logan recalled moments of true intimacy through shared nurturance, and she called for spiritual integration.

Chapter two focuses on the ways that Logan understood the imperatives of womanhood. For her, this revolved around what historian Jessica Wilkerson calls an “ethic of care.” Logan’s sense of ideal women as mothers – biological and social motherhood²⁰ – and wives was simple, traditional, and profoundly empowering. Logan’s life was female-centered, and this influenced the way she viewed gender and sex. Gender and femininity also played a crucial part in the shaping of Logan as a nurse and midwife, as these were (and to a certain extent, are) gender coded careers. The way that Logan saw gender – although in many ways conventional, was progressive for her time.

²⁰ Social motherhood as I experienced it growing up in rural Alabama involves more community-based parenting, often through adults in environments like churches, or through extended family members. This leads to an environment that puts much more importance on respect of elders, specific terms for older adults (i.e. – aunt, auntie, uncle, Mr., Mrs., Miss), and adults who are not parents themselves becoming involved in discipline, supervision, and other child-rearing tasks.

The focus of *chapter three* is religion. For Logan, telling the story of her life was an evangelical act, offered gently to a secular world. Religion was all-encompassing for Logan. Raised in a strict Christian family, her relationship with God, the church, and Christianity influenced her deeply. She filtered her entire worldview through a religious lens. This section will explore the way that Logan used religion as a tool to understand the world, receive information, and relate to those around her. She offers this compassionate worldview to her reader. Religion in the southern United States in general is also explored in this chapter.

Chapter four focuses on what Logan left behind. When Onnie Lee Logan passed away in 1995, midwifery had been criminalized in Alabama for two decades. The criminalization of midwifery in Alabama was not abrupt but evolved over several years. In 1976, Alabama prohibited the licensing of any new midwives, but the state allowed midwives with existing licenses to continue practicing. Logan was the last practicing licensed granny midwife in Mobile County when her license was revoked; she was given no explanation for why the state chose that moment to enforce its new rules. Home birth attending midwives continued to be illegal in Alabama until 2017. In the two decades after Logan's death, the shape of midwifery in Alabama (and in the United States as a whole) shifted dramatically. I argue that studying Logan's career, and specifically contrasting the way that Logan was treated with the then growing hippie home birth movement is an important way to examine the landscape of midwifery in Alabama today. Logan's work, then, was not just in her activism around race, gender, and Christianity, but also in offering a model for midwives and mothers.

Chapter 1 – “This Is The Way of Truth”: Logan’s Racial Activism

One hundred years ago, in the small town of Sweet Water, Alabama, a pregnant black laundress was approached by her white employer. The laundress, named Martha, may have been folding his linens, or scrubbing his sheets, or wringing out his dishcloths. The relationship that existed between the man and the laundress was without a doubt that of an employer and employee, with all the power dynamics that exist in that role as well as the power dynamics that came from their respective races. No matter what small task she might have been performing, there was no denying the fact that she was completing work for him, not for herself, her husband or her many small children.

Named Jack Maynard, details of Martha’s employer are now mostly lost to history. We know that he was widowed. He was white. He was well off enough to hire a laundress to wash and dry and fold his clothes. When he approached Martha on an unknown and unnamed date in the early 1900s, he had a favor in mind. Instead of asking her to darn his socks, or remove a stain from his favorite dress shirt, or bleach his linens to a stark crisp white, he instead asked her for the right to name the child she carried. “Tinny,”²¹ he stated, “you let me name that baby if it’s a girl and I’ll buy it some dresses.”²²

Onnie Lee Logan did not record her mother’s feelings about the situation. Maybe her mother never communicated her feelings to Logan. Perhaps she did, but Logan wished to keep them private. In any case, this story, which conveys so much about relations between white and black people in Alabama in the early 1900s, receives just a brief paragraph in the first chapter of Logan’s autobiography. It’s unknown whether or not Martha stood there, heart racing, trying to

²¹ This was apparently one of Logan’s mother’s nicknames – Logan does not expound on why Maynard called her “Tinny.”

²² Logan, *Motherwit*, 1.

understand why her employer so casually asked for the rights to name her unborn child, or if she laughed and made light of a strange request from a strange older man. Perhaps their relationship was friendly enough that this request was a pleasant one; perhaps there was an antagonism there that ran deep enough that Logan's mother felt she could never turn down a request from him. No matter the situation, Martha's feelings are unknown. What is known is that the baby that Martha carried was indeed a girl, and they did name her Onnie, after Jack Maynard's deceased wife.

The world that Logan presents in her autobiography is one of intense complexity. The social and cultural expectations, particularly as they related to relationships between white and black people post Reconstruction were both tenuous and intricate. Due to these social structures, and taking into account not only the racial power structures in place between Maynard and Logan's mother but also their relationship as employee and employer, it is doubtful that Logan's mother truly consented to naming her daughter after Maynard's deceased wife. In any case, although there is no way to determine for certain whether or not Logan's mother truly wished for her daughter to bear the name of Onnie, the naming of baby Logan is an example of the racial structures in place in Alabama in the early 1900s.

When Logan tells the story of how she received her name, she is really telling a larger story. It is only one of the stories about race that Logan implicitly shares in her autobiography. Race relations, she reveals, largely (although not entirely), differed according to gender. Relations between the men in her family and white men were most often fraught and dangerous; relations between black women and white people were often complicated by a coercive intimacy. That said, Logan offers a few glimpses of possibility within a larger critical story, and in the end, she is clear about the work white people need to do to create a just world here, and in heaven.

This is not overt; it is not marching; it is not petitioning; it is not calling out. This is a respectable and respected older woman telling it as it is, her form of careful, reasoned, thoughtful activism.

Due to the race relations in the United States during her lifetime, Logan illustrates that it was close to impossible for white and black people to have a truly equitable relationship. Even if Jack Maynard cared deeply for Logan's mother, and eventually for Logan herself, the power dynamic between the two was still imbalanced. Because of this, the request that Maynard made of Logan's mother was coercive, even if he did not intend for it to be. It was intimate without having the foundation for a genuinely intimate relationship. This is a theme that occurs throughout *Motherwit*. By using the greater context of race relations during Logan's lifetime, the threads of violent conflict as well as coercive intimacy become easier to identify.

In *Motherwit*, Logan provides careful but frank critiques of the way that white and black citizens interacted during her lifetime. She tells stories of her brothers' interactions with the Ku Klux Klan, describes prejudice her family faced from white citizens of Sweet Water, and discusses her encounters with a white supervisor at the Board of Health in Mobile who antagonized her. While the way that black and white people interacted had overarching similarities across the country, in order to understand the undercurrents of the situation of Logan's naming, one must first have a firm grasp on race relations in the Black Belt of Alabama in the early 1900s.

Geographically, the Black Belt of Alabama is a wide swath of land that stretches from Sumter and Choctaw counties on the western border of the state, all the way to Russell and Barbour counties on the eastern edge. Part of a larger slash of land that crosses from Texas to Virginia, this area of the state has historically been home to both some of the richest land and

most impoverished people in Alabama.²³ From its gently rolling dark green fields full of songbirds, forests of tall thin pine, stout live oak, deep murky swamps and rivers brimming with alligators, crawfish, salamanders, and great large sturgeon, and striking riverbed cliffs of bright white Selma chalk etched through with the tiny skeletons of prehistoric fish and crustaceans, the Black Belt is a beautiful and rich geographical section of Alabama. However, the history of the Black Belt is not as beautiful as its topography. Given its name because of the dark, fertile topsoil that makes the area ideal for farming, this area was primarily used to grow cotton and was home to many plantations where African Americans were enslaved.

The legacy that these plantations left is one of social and financial inequality. While the Black Belt is considered the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement and towns like Selma and Marion produced many activists, artists, and revolutionaries, the area is now marked by its poverty. The Black Belt is also known for having the highest population of black citizens in Alabama outside of major cities like Mobile, Montgomery, and Birmingham.²⁴ The Black Belt, which is made up of ten counties in Alabama, was originally home to half of Alabama's enslaved population. In *Race and Schooling in the South: 1880-1950: An Economic History*, Robert A. Margo discusses the Black Belt, and how the southern black population was concentrated in these rural counties.²⁵

During the early 1900s, relations between white and black people in the Black Belt (and beyond) were still tenuous. Slavery was fresh in common memory, with families like Logan's having parents or grandparents who had either been enslaved or were born to former slaves. The

²³ *About The Black Belt*, University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, accessed October 20, 2019 - http://www.uaced.ua.edu/uploads/1/9/0/4/19045691/about_the_black_belt.pdf

²⁴ "African Americans," Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH), accessed February 7, 2020, <http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/minorityhealth/african-americans.html>

²⁵ Robert A. Margo. *Race and Schooling in the South: 1880-1950: An Economic History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994,) 94.

Ku Klux Klan had a resurgence amongst white citizens, and lynchings and other forms of violence against black individuals were common.²⁶ In the preface to his text, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*, historian Glenn Feldman states:

Alabama, it must be said, is a special state. In virtually every period of American History it has made a name for itself, often for the worst reasons. During the 1890s, Alabamians lynched more people than any other state in the Union. In the 1920s, and even before, Birmingham earned a reputation as “bad, bad, Birmingham,” the “murder capital of the world.”²⁷

As Feldman notes, Alabama was a perilous state for black individuals. The danger was real for both Logan and her family.

During Logan’s lifetime, work made a major impact on her life and the lives of her family members. In post-Reconstruction Alabama, the workforce was racially segregated. While many black citizens, including Logan’s family, worked as farmers (either as sharecroppers or on farms of their own), expanded access to education made it possible for black citizens to work in other industries had they allowed it. Yet, when work opportunities opened, they were highly segregated. From 1910, the year that Logan approximates she was born, to 1940, occupational segregation in the southern states increased roughly 45%.²⁸

After the end of slavery, former slaves transitioned into freedom. As soon as it became evident that the north would win the Civil War, the question of how to best integrate these newly freed citizens came to the forefront. One of the work options for freed black citizens was farming, given their knowledge and experience. Abandoned plantations were utilized and seized

²⁶ Glenn Feldman. *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015,) 1.

²⁷ Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*, 1.

²⁸ Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South*, 93.

for land that was initially sold to black farmers.²⁹ Sharecropping and tenant farming became common, but between 1886 and 1932, some efforts were made to decrease sharecropping and tenant farming and foster more independent farming by black farmers. Increasingly, however, across the south, crops like cotton, tobacco, and rice were grown on an industrial scale, making the work of small family farmers harder.

Large scale and tenant farming were common work for black citizens, even if some family farms also existed in Alabama. It was on one of these family farms that Logan and her family lived. She described it well. Rolling green pastures stretched out, bordered by fringes of scrub oak and pine and dotted with lowing oxen, bleating goats, mooing cows, gentle horses, and braying mules. There were barnyards so populated with chickens, guineas, and ducks that she could barely walk through them, bitties darting under her feet and roosters scratching at the ground. Vegetable gardens full of bitter turnips, crisp string beans, creamy butter beans and all kinds of potatoes, squash, and okra provided bounty for both table and town. Fields of corn for grits and bread and cotton for selling in town, swamps full of rice ready for harvest abounded along with orchards of peaches, pears, and plums, and swaths of cane for making syrup. The rest of the land was forested with tall straight pine ready to be cut down and planed into boards. The rich bounty that one can envision when Logan describes the farm that she grew up on seems to be the stuff of paradise.

When Logan refers to her childhood home as a “plantation,” it is easy to assume that she is describing a literal plantation of slavery days. However, Logan’s family was made up of independent farmers. Logan informs her readers, proudly, that her grandfather gave her father

²⁹ “*Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000*,” RBS Research Report 194 (United States Department of Agriculture, October 2002), <https://www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/RR194.pdf>

land before she was born. “He give him a start at life. He put a deed in my father’s name. I have no way in the world to know how my grandfather got that land. All I know is he had it. I don’t know whether his old slave daddy give it to him or how he come about it.”³⁰ While Logan did not know how her grandfather acquired the land that she and her family lived so well on, she dedicates a large portion of her autobiography discussing it. Part of the reason Logan gives her readers so many descriptions of the property she grew up on is to describe her class, and establish that her family was better off than many of the other families, black and white alike, in Sweet Water. This was both prideful and an acknowledgement that life was harder for most.

Many families in Sweet Water were sharecroppers. This was, by all accounts, a miserable existence for any person, and the practice arose in popularity in the south during the Reconstruction period as a replacement for slave labor. “According to one report, by 1870 sharecropping was so prevalent that any other form of contract is but the exception,” historian Edward Royce writes in his work, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*.³¹ It was prevalent and grueling work with little return. While any farmer working their own land was able to fully reap the fruits of their own labor, choose what they needed to keep in order to feed their family, and sell the rest in order to provide money for other needs, but these farmers worked other people’s land to be rewarded with a small portion of the food or funds raised. In *Poor But Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites*, Wayne Flint describes how a “rural sociologist at Auburn University studied several hundred Alabama sharecroppers and found that three-fourths of the farmers who began farming as croppers remained croppers. Less than one-tenth became owners.”³² Logan herself describes the practice as miserable before reiterating that her family was *not*

³⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 43.

³¹ Edward Cary Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 2.

³² Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (University of Alabama Press, 2015), 85.

sharecroppers. They were able to enjoy the bounty they produced on their farm. She was careful to include both her own experience and the experience of others.

While Logan's family was rich in food, they were not always rich in money. Logan describes her father hiring out her brothers and sisters and her to go work in the fields, in hoeing cotton or laying crops. The money that they earned was used to buy things like socks, material for clothes, and even, eventually, an automobile.

We lived a happy, comfortable life to be right outa slavery times. I didn't know nothin else but the farm so it was happy and we was happy and we could see ourselves a lot mo fo'tunate than the rest of em. We couldn't do anything else but be happy. We accept the days as they come and as they were.³³

While Logan was happy to live a comfortable life with her family, and considered herself fortunate, she also mentions many things about her home growing that up reveals that her family had, at least occasionally, modest means. She also makes it clear that she understood her own privilege: even with modest means her family was "a lot mo fo'tunate" than many others in her community.

Logan describes in detail the house she grew up in. Built by her grandfather, the house was large and comfortable. "A great big hall was right straight down all the way down through the middle."³⁴ There were rooms on one side for the boys to sleep in, and rooms on the others for the girls. They had a guest room for the preacher, or relatives who came visits. They even had an organ and a room that was dedicated to courting, with a tall Victrola record player.

All of Logan's descriptions of the farm - the bounty of animals and vegetables, the land owned outright, the house with the many rooms for sleeping, eating, and courting - are

³³ Logan, *Motherwit*, 33.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 15; The type of house that Logan is describing is common in the south - the long hallway down the middle of the house is often open to the outside on both ends. This allows both doors to be opened so air can circulate through the middle of the house during the hottest days of summer.

impressive. However, one representative of her family's higher wealth class comes in the form of something that was rare for many families, white or black, during this time period: an automobile. After describing the two wells full of cold fresh water, their outhouse, and the big dishpans on the back porch to wash dishes in, she mentions their shed in the back. In it they had, she states, a buggy, a surrey, and a wagon. These vehicles, all designed to be pulled by oxen or horses or mules, were common on farms. The automobile, however, was not.

A T Model Ford was "the biggest Fo'd that Fo'd had then."³⁵ Once Logan's family had a car, she says, they were never without one again. The way she describes this fact is tinged with pride, laced with modesty, and overall a claim of the social and financial status that her family built for themselves. "Even durin' the Depression we had a car. I'm just telling you what's a fact. It wasn't a fact for most people. But I cain't deny myself of who I am just because a lot a the rest of em didn't have that." These wealth signifiers go beyond just signifying class: they also act as clues to tell readers how Logan's father and mother did not adhere to common racial restrictions and stereotypes by working as land-owning, comfortable farmers, carpenters, and midwives. They were the exception that proved the rule. But it did not mean they were without compassion for the lives others led.³⁶

The second story that Mrs. Logan tells in the first chapter of her memoir is of her father and his lineage. Her father, she explains, was part Native American. "He was a big, stout, nice-lookin, light-skinned Indian man."³⁷ Logan puts great emphasis on the fact that her father, who she states was at least two-thirds Native American, did not look like a black man. Logan speaks in detail about not only the color of her father's skin, but also his "beautiful straight hair" soft

³⁵ Logan, *Motherwit*, 33.

³⁶ Ray Douglas Hurt, *African American Life in the Rural South: 1900-1950*, (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003), 41.

³⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 1.

enough to lay down with just a little oil. When speaking of her father's skin and hair, she also describes the hair of her father's sister, which she wore "parted in the middle and platted in two plats." Logan is quick to describe her father's people as physically large people, strong and sturdy. It is evident from the way Logan speaks of her father and his family that she takes much pride in the way that they looked, as well as the work that they did.

Colorism is not a concept that Logan would have known by name, but she certainly revealed its effects in her daily life from childhood until her death. Colorism, by definition, is "prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin."³⁸ Logan's emphasis on how her father and his family were light-skinned "Indians" is evident from the very first pages of her memoir. In addition to the emphasis she puts on her father's family's light skin, she also discusses how her mother and her mother's family were darker skinned. "We got most of our darkness on our mother's side which she had Indian in her too. But there was different Indians. Creek and Choctaw. So my daddy was one and my mother was the other. My mother her part Indian she was the dark. That's the Creek Indians."³⁹ It's evident even in this early chapter that Logan was taught to prize light skin and soft hair, traits that were seen as more Caucasian.

In the United States in the 20th century colorism was and is a direct result of white supremacy and the effect that it had on society.⁴⁰ In her book, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*, Deborah Gabriel discusses how the affinity for light skin that still exists today is an example of the cultural domination of whiteness, and a direct consequence of

³⁸Merriam Webster, s.v. "colourism:" *prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin.* <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colourism>, accessed January 23, 2020

³⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 52.

⁴⁰ Deborah Gabriel, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*, (London: Imani Media, 2007), 11.

colonialism. There's also evidence that colorism in the United States (and presumably beyond) can be traced to preferences that slaveholders had for slaves with lighter complexions. Enslaved women who worked inside the home were more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Enslaved people who were lighter skinned were more likely to be chosen for work inside of households versus work in fields. Enslaved men who were lighter skin were more likely to be chosen for work as craftsmen and apprentices. Slaves who were mixed-race as well as lighter complected were also more likely to receive an education.⁴¹ With all of these contributing factors, there's no question as to why Logan and the people around her put a high importance on the color of one's skin.

In addition to the issue of colorism, Logan's attention to her Native American heritage reflects how they were treated compared to black citizens in Alabama and the United States as a whole. According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, there are nine recognized tribes in the state of Alabama: The Poarch Band of Creeks,⁴² The MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians, The Star Clan of Muscogee Creeks, The Echota Cherokees of Alabama, The Cherokees of Northeast Alabama, The Cherokees of Southeast Alabama, The Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe, The Piqua Sept of Ohio Shawnee Tribe, and United Cherokee Ani-Yun-Wiya Nation.⁴³ From Moundville⁴⁴ to the Trail of Tears, Alabama Native history is rich and deep.

⁴¹ Howard Bodenhorn, and Christopher S. Ruebeck. "Colourism and African—American Wealth: Evidence from the Nineteenth-century South," *Journal of Population Economics* 20, no. 3 (2007): 599, Accessed January 20, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20730770.

⁴² This is the only Alabama Indian Tribe that is federally recognized and received health services via the Indian Health Services Division of the Federal Government - the Poarch Creek Indians are also currently highly involved in many areas of development in southeastern Alabama, including building schools, water parks, casinos, etc. <http://pci-nsn.gov/wordpress/>

⁴³ "Alabama Indian/AK Native," Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH), accessed January 20, 2020, <http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/minorityhealth/american-indians.html>

⁴⁴ Moundville Archeological Park, which is located only an hour from Sweet Water, where Logan grew up, was the political, ceremonial, and social center of the Mississippian culture. To this day there are burial mounds throughout the southeast, including many locations in Alabama. <https://moundville.museums.ua.edu/about/>

Relations between Native Americans and Black citizens in Alabama were complex. Some historians describe these relationships as mostly positive, describing how Native Americans and black citizens joined as disenfranchised peoples, often intermarrying and interacting with each other. Logan's family seems to be an example of this, with both her parents having Native American heritage.⁴⁵ Logan was not only aware of this, but proud of this as well. She mentions the traits that her family inherited from this side of her family – her father's hair that laid down straight with just a little oil, her aunt's heavy braids that laid down over her breasts, and the light skin that her father's side of the family had. Yet these traits, however desirable, did not keep her family from facing racial discrimination.

The ways that Logan speaks of racial prejudice in her autobiography is telling. One of the ways where the racial atmosphere of Alabama in the early 20th century becomes most apparent is in the way in which Logan describes her brothers. Logan had six brothers, and in nearly every description she provides of them, they are defined by their relationships to white men, either in how they worked for them or how they were antagonized by them. Harvey, her parents' oldest child, died when he was six years old. While his death, caused by severe burns he received when his clothes caught on fire while tending a boiling washpot, was not born directly out of racial violence, Logan writes of how there was no doctor brought on to help tend his burns. Logan does not mention whether her family declined to call a doctor because of money, or because of a lack of a doctor to serve black families. Instead, she merely states that "wasn't the way you did back then." Elmer, the second boy in her family, Logan describes as a "good boy. He was the best."⁴⁶ Elmer worked for two white men, Mr. Miller and Mr. Cox, in a lumber mill. Logan describes in detail how even though Elmer worked as a logger, he also had a farm of his own with beautiful

⁴⁵ Logan, *Motherwit*, 34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 30.

horses. Elmer was the father of a large family, and the birth of his children acted as the awakening that made her fall in love with midwifery.

Curtis, the next brother that Logan describes, served in World War 1, was a logger, and raised oxen. Logan paints a picture of a gentle man who loved his oxen, and who left home to fight in World War 1 during the same time her brother Elmer passed away. This was incredibly hard on Logan's mother, who "just cried when Curtis went and my brother Elmer died. I can just hear Mother now when I was a lil girl. 'When he gets home, Curtis will never see his brother ever no mo.' I can just hear that. And she's just sobbin. Made me cry too."⁴⁷ Logan's mother not only mourned because Elmer had passed away, she mourned because Curtis would never be able to see him again. This is an illustration of how close Logan's family was, something that Logan prized greatly.

That closeness was imperiled by differing strategies her brothers had for dealing with the ubiquitous threat of violence that surrounded her community. The next brother Logan describes had a much more tenuous relationship with white men than Curtis or Elmer did. Amos, according to Logan, was the black sheep of the family. While the rest of her brothers are described as her mother and father's "fine boys," Amos is listed as the exception. "He wasn't bad," Logan writes. "There was not a mean streak in him. He was just a lil off from the family."⁴⁸ Amos worked as the fireman of a locomotive train, and Logan describes him as "not standing off white people." Against the social norms of the day, Amos was not afraid of or submissive to white people in his surroundings. Logan writes that he did not bother white people, or pick at them, but that he was not afraid of them. This was dangerous and led to his undoing.

⁴⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

After being fired from his job as fireman of the train, Amos became convinced that the owners of the train were “go’n beat him up like the Ku Klux Klans.” After coming home, bathing, and changing his clothes, Amos armed himself with a shotgun and shells and readied himself for what he thought was a sure battle. By Logan’s account, there was no confrontation, and Amos moved to Mobile, where he went without contact with his family for many years. Amos also apparently left behind a wife and son in Sweet Water. Later, news was delivered that Amos had killed a woman after moving to Mississippi. Logan states that this woman was not his wife, but rather his “old lady,” and describes how Mississippi was a horrible place to exist as a black person. It was there, in Mississippi, that Amos was either hung, or hung and shot. “Those words hadn’t been sent to Mother and Daddy or none a tha family but that is what we heard. Somethin hapened to him. He never did come back no mo. He was that child you couldn’t reach.”⁴⁹ Logan’s parents ended up raising Amos’s son.

The way that Logan relates her brother’s story is complicated. Amos does not bend to white men in Logan’s recounting of his life. Instead of bowing to the owners of the train, he armed himself. Rather than taking abuse or mistreatment with meekness, Amos fought back. Ultimately, this seemed to lead to his demise. Yet instead of explicitly praising him for standing up for himself, she refers to him as the “child you couldn’t reach.”⁵⁰ But he still was without a “mean streak”; he was not bad. He just chose another way.

Sid and Lummy, who also both worked in lumber, are the last brothers that Logan mentions. Here again are stories of threatened violence and the KKK. In Logan’s memoir, Sid gets more attention. She tells gripping stories of Sid. One of the accounts that Logan relates takes place during the winter, when darkness falls much earlier than the summer. Logan is careful to

⁴⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

mention this, because, as she states in the story, “those Klans wouldn’t come straight out in the broad daylight.”⁵¹ She goes on to describe how the owners and many of the other employees of the lumber mill that Sid and Lummy both worked at were members of the Ku Klux Klan. They referred to their black employees as “slave labor,” and apparently confrontations between the members of the KKK and their black employees were common.

Logan describes a cold winter night, and recounts that things had been tense at the lumber mill between Sid and hostile white men. Sid, according to Logan, was not a brave man. That said, he had to function within the world he was given. Their mother was so worried about him that she had bought him a shotgun for self-protection. On this night, Sid had cause to use that shotgun. A group of Klansmen had followed him home from work, intending either to scare him and his family or cause them harm. Logan writes that Sid told his wife and children to hide inside of their house and lock the doors, while he crawled under their corn crib with the shotgun. When the Klansmen appeared, Sid shot at them. “They’re comin up the street creepin and runnin and talkin. Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow. Scared em to death. They left. They didn’t bother him no mo.”⁵² One of the most painful parts of this story is the fact that Sid said out of the five men that were after him, “one of em was a good friend that he loved so well and who pretended to love Sid so well.”⁵³ Love and connection between coworkers across racial lines, she suggested here, did not trump racial solidarity when it came down to it.

Here is a moment when, for Logan, the interactions between white men and black men overlapped with those between white people and black women. This story of a black man antagonized and physically threatened by a white man whom he considered his friend, so much

⁵¹ Ibid, 43.

⁵² Logan, *Motherwit*, 33.

⁵³ Ibid

so that when retelling the story years later, his sister described him as loving him, is exquisitely painful. It is hard to picture the amount of hurt and betrayal that he felt when being faced with violence and terror at the hand of a friend. However, it is an example of how racial interactions between white and black citizens were structured in the 20th century not only in Alabama, but across the country, and it is an example that Logan chose to relate. Her brother – not a brave man, a black man who understood his relationship to a white man as authentic friendship – was betrayed and forced into defending himself and his family against violent and cowardly (out only after dark) white men. Exposing the constant terror her brothers had to face was a form of activism in a simple, matter of fact way.

Racism, Logan reveals, was a constant thread in her life and her family's life. This is borne out by scholars of the era and the region. Psychologist and socialist John Dollard, who wrote *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* in 1937, conducted extensive fieldwork and research in Mississippi alongside anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker. One of the areas in which racial and class taboos showed the strongest were involved with food, particularly with how, where, and when people should eat. This is one of the examples of the “racial etiquette” that dominated life in the segregated south. Dollard wrote of common taboos for whites during this time, which included sharing meals at the same table as a black person, sitting with black people on the front porch of their homes, and generally sharing intimate spaces (which porches and tables are considered) cross-racially.

The friendship that Sid presumed was fragile, given the context of the time. Dollard went on to explain how breaking racial taboos such as these directly implied social equality. “The white-caste view on this matter is simple and logically consistent,” he wrote. “It is felt that social

equality would lead directly to sexual equality.”⁵⁴ This taboo is also explored by Gardner in their text *Deep South*, who claimed that many of these social rules were implemented to help guard against sexual relations between black men and white women, as well as coming alongside formal laws prohibiting intermarriage between whites and blacks. This suggests that these relationships were common, fraught, complicated, and consensual.

Other historians, like Ed Ayers, argue this same point, claiming that sexual control was always the central to the way that southern states built both their social and formal laws. Stretching from plantation era miscegenation to the way that Jim Crow laws dictated racial division of the public sphere, more than one historian claims that sexual fears are what segregation hoped to stave off.

Intimacy between the races – of any kind – Logan reveals as both inevitable and fraught. The way that these rules were instituted and enforced from the very earliest years are most easily seen in the way that white children interacted with black caregivers, and how black and white children interacted together. The rules that permeated the south during this era were most clear when looking at how they were broken. Marcie Cohen Ferris uses the subject of food to analyze and critique southern culture on a larger scale. When Ferris writes of the way that rules were relaxed to allow white children to dine together with black domestic workers, she retells stories originally gathered by anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker. In this story, Powdermaker discusses an interview with a white informant, and how this informant stated that the “happiest memory of her childhood” was when she was allowed to go “across the tracks” with her family’s black cook, where “they all sat down at the table and ate turnip greens.”⁵⁵ Rules for interracial

⁵⁴ John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2010), 353.

⁵⁵ Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: the Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 246.

dining were also bent, Ferris writes, for men on occasion, such as when a white and black man went fishing together and were permitted to cook and eat their catch together in the open.⁵⁶ The stories that Ferris tells involve happy perspectives from white people who were briefly allowed in their childhood to interact with their black neighbors and employees in a way that was not generally allowed. When looking at this from the perspective of *Motherwit*, however, these relationships take on a different tinge. Even when Logan describes a white man as a friend of her brother, that “friendship” still ended pain, discrimination, terror, and antagonism.

In her text *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*, Jennifer Lynn Ritterhouse takes the racial rules beyond the supper table. White parents, Ritterhouse writes, began instructing their children on proper racial interactions in two main categories: “restrictions against too much intimacy with black people and lessons in naming and courtesy titles.”⁵⁷ Restrictions against intimacy came in many different forms, including those against sharing tables, but were bent in many ways. Ritterhouse writes of how especially among the southern elite, many children, girls and boys, became remarkably close to their black caregivers. “A great many Southern white children in those days had the experience of giving their first love to a black woman or a black man and then being taught little by little that it was a relationship they couldn’t have,⁵⁸” Ritterhouse quotes here Virginia Durr, a civil rights activist who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Ritterhouse’s work helps make sense of Logan’s life and the kinds of expectations that circled around her relationships with white people.

At the tender age of 15, Onnie Lee Logan began a job as a maid in a white home, working for a woman named Mrs. Addison, whose family owned a grocery store in Sweet

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina), 79.

⁵⁸ Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 79-80.

Water.⁵⁹ Logan's mother worked as a laundress for the Addisons, along with many other families, including Jack Maynard, the man who asked Logan's mother to name her after his deceased wife. This job as a maid, however, was the beginning of Logan's lifelong work for white families in Alabama. From all accounts, Logan took her job as a housekeeper seriously, even though she by no means considered it a calling like she did her work as a midwife. The white people in her life did not always view her as a midwife with an illustrious career. In the eyes of some of her employers, she was first and foremost a domestic worker, someone to look after and care for a white family before her own.⁶⁰

The stereotype of the "mammy" is one of the most enduring and most recognizable caricatures in the United States, and the image is still present in pop culture today. The purpose of the caricature was multifaceted, serving the political, social, and economic interests of white America. Often portrayed as larger bodied, older, dark-skinned, completely desexualized, and perpetually content, the "mammy" existed only to serve white interests, both before and after Reconstruction.⁶¹ Even without naming herself – or depicting herself – as a mammy, Logan might have easily fallen into white expectations around that role.

While Logan considered midwifery her calling, she also worked as a domestic worker for much of her life, even during her career as a midwife. Despite coming from a family with more economic security than many black families were able to have during the early 1900s, Logan and the other women in her family were still put into the position of serving white people. It's also evident in *Motherwit* that Logan was sharply aware of the way that she was seen by the families who employed her, and that she knew that the way she interacted with these families shaped the

⁵⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 72.

⁶⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 171.

⁶¹ Janet Sinclair Gray, *Race and Time: American Womens Poetics from Antislavery to Racial Modernity*, (Iowa: University of Iowa, 2004), 19.

way she lived her life. The intimacy that these relationships forced her into were clearly in some ways coercive, she reveals.

These relationships could also be dismissive. Logan was aware of both the respect she deserved and the disrespect she received. In the afterword of the current print edition of *Motherwit*, Katherine Clark tells a story that took place not long after the initial publication. In her later years, Mrs. Logan worked as a housekeeper for multiple wealthy white families in Mobile, Alabama. One of these families were transplants from up north, however, and the matriarch of the family, a Mrs. Simpson, was not much impressed by the Mobile community. Logan stated that Mrs. Simpson “thinks these Southerners is trash... cain’t get em to do nothin but sit down.”⁶² Clark also states that Logan revealed to her how Mrs. Simpson was not supportive of Logan’s career as a midwife, and did not treat her well. This was best summed up by the story of how Mrs. Simpson, when invited to help throw Logan’s book release party, did not want to help. She did not think the party was warranted until she learned that Logan’s other employers were involved. Only then did she choose to participate.

Clark made the decision to include her conversation with Logan about the disrespect this implied in *Motherwit* without returning to consult Logan about it. This upset Logan greatly; not only was it a breach of Southern etiquette to imply criticism of a white lady employer, it was a breach of the trust Logan had built with Clark. By then, Clark should have known better; she should have understood the ways that racial prejudice worked and the kinds of choices Logan made to deal with it. Clark related their interaction:

But Onnie was uncomfortable about incurring the wrath of the white lady and felt that she had upset the normal balance of her life. When she called me over to read the offending passage to her, she acknowledged having said the words but reproached me for including them.⁶³

⁶² Logan, *Motherwit*, 191.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 192.

The “normal balance” of Logan’s life, she revealed to Clark, relied on adherence to certain ways of being with white people. A book party where Logan was served by her wealthy white employers was difficult enough, but she did not want any – even deserved – criticism of them to accompany that. Maintaining racial equilibrium was important to Logan. It is a measure of the real intimacy she felt with Clark that she was able to confront her and explain that.

Simply by being a black woman living and working in Alabama, Logan was keenly aware of expected behaviors and interactions that she was supposed to display in her interactions with white women. What this interaction revealed was the care with which she related her stories for her memoir, and then intentions behind them. This interaction was not one that she wanted to go public: it revealed too much. While Clark and many of her contemporaries did not immediately understand the cause for Logan’s discomfort as running deeper than an employee not wanting to upset an employer, centuries of expected racial interactions and expectations were present in this process. What Logan wanted Clark to preserve was her private, critical gaze on white women’s hypocrisies, a critical gaze that would belie performed submissiveness entirely.

While race is an inescapable backdrop in *Motherwit*, the way that Logan interpreted the events and people that surrounded her in her childhood is not always straightforward. Early in *Motherwit*, when discussing whether white people in her community resented her family for being well-off, Logan states:

I cain’t recall at all the white people resentin our family because we were well off. Not at all. They loved Len Rodgers. That’s my daddy. They loved Martha Rodgers. They always took them as people. I cain’t remember any white man tryin to cheat or deceive us. Now it coulda been. But if it was I didn’t know nothin about it. Mother did washin for so many of em they all met us with nice happy faces. In the quarter to get all this washin they would always wave, the chil’rens. Plenty of em they always waved at us. They hollered at us and we waved at them.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Logan, *Motherwit*, 12.

Logan initially describes this way of interacting with white neighbors in a way that insinuates that she felt positively about these interactions. However, in the very next sentence, Logan begins to describe how occasionally she and her family were met with racial slurs. She describes this casually, with her tone coming across as explanatory instead of accusatory. This way of speaking, she stated, was taught to the white people she interacted with. “They didn’t know to say ‘Hey, Onnie.’ That meant the same thing.”⁶⁵ When discussing this, Logan seems almost apologetic on behalf of the white people who called her and her family terrible names. She excuses their behavior by saying that they did not know better, and that this is what they had been taught.

Outside of her work with the wealthy elite of Mobile, Logan also encountered white people who antagonized her because of her race. One example Logan gives is Mrs. Camp, who worked at the Board of Health in Mobile when Logan was practicing as a midwife. Mrs. Camp sat in the corner of the Board of Health building and she threw glances at Logan whenever she came in the building. Every time Logan came into the Board of Health, Mrs. Camp raised her head and looked at Logan like she was “somethin that stunk.”⁶⁶

She didn’t ever say anything to me – just looked. That’s the way Mrs. Camp treated me. She always give me those lil cuts. When I come in to have a meetin with Mrs. Pete or Mrs. Davidson or go in to get me some supplies, Mrs. Camp just looked at me like I was somethin. I know where it was comin from. I knew the whole time I’m sittin there waitin there was prejudice. And when they made her my supervisor I didn’t let nobody know but I was disappointed within my heart. I never said anything to anybody about it. Because I could see it and feel it and knew that she didn’t care for me.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Logan, *Motherwit*, 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 164.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 164-165.

The implication here is that there were white women who *did* care about Logan and the work that she did. Mrs. Camp was notable because she did not offer Logan the respect she deserved and to some extent had come to expect.

Significantly, and unusual for the memoir, is what follows. “And you wanna know the truth?” Logan asks Clark, implying that she was revealing more than she usually did. “She (Mrs. Camp) knowed as much about supervisin there as you do. You know you don’t know nothing about supervisin there. And she knew I knew everything and I knew five times mo than she knew about it.” Logan here clearly asserts that her experience and knowledge exceeded that of the white woman supervising her. She also suggests that her experience trumped not only Mrs. Camp but the young white woman transcribing her story. Her trust in Clark comes through here as well. “You know you don’t know nothin about supervisin” suggests her confidence that Clark doesn’t presume that her race gives her an authority she hasn’t earned, and that she would be in no way offended in the way another – like Mrs. Camp – would.

Logan was well-aware that Mrs. Camp did not like her because of her race, and yet was forced to interact with her in order to keep her job. This is yet another example of coercive intimacy: while Mrs. Camp was allowed to act towards Logan with prejudice and still keep her job, Logan was coerced by racial standards into being respectful and professional towards someone who not only treated her with disdain, but was much less qualified for her job than Logan was for her own.

Despite the presence of coercive intimacy in both work and friendships, occasionally moments of real intimacy between women of different races are recorded in Logan’s memoir. These are crucial, offering a space for white readers to imagine a better future. One of the most intriguing and touching accounts from *Motherwit* is a small paragraph in the beginning of the

text, when Logan is describing her childhood years and how her family lived in Sweet Water. Logan tells the story of her mother, who was still pregnant and nursing, and her neighbor, an unnamed white woman. This woman had also recently had a baby, and Logan describes how they exchanged wet-nursing favors for each other. While black women nursing the children of white women was quite common in the south as a form of exploitation specific to enslaved women, this instance lacks the context of slavery.

Now you take my mother was havin chil'rens and her neighbor, white woman, if she wanted to go to town to Sweet Water to shop or whatnot, my mother would go up there and nurse that baby. And if Mother had to be gone on a delivery or up there in the town, her baby was carried up there to that white lady. And she fed it from her breast. Fed my mother's black baby from her white breast. They both did that. It was understood.⁶⁸

"They both did that," she establishes; this was an equality that "was understood." From this framework, Logan paints a picture of two equals existing in an unequal landscape, two neighbors exchanging favors of the highest order, nourishing each other's babies with their own bodies.

In her memoir Logan makes clear – in her careful, non-confrontational way – what kind of racial world she would prefer. After describing the situation with the hostile Mrs. Camp, Logan goes on to share her thoughts on how white and black people should interact:

Let me tell you somethin and this is the way of truth. If every white person under God's sun just was to believe it - if you cain't live with me down here we both cain't live together in heaven. Cause God ain't got no co'ner for you up there and another co'ner for me so we got to try to get together and live if right here. When the time come for it to be boilin down, you are my sister and I'm yo sister. We're supposed not to be said you're my black sister and I'm yo white sister. We are sisters in Christ whether you're black or white. The mo we live together and cooperate together and communicate together, the closer we will get as a human person and that's what God aim for us to do. That's what He wants for us to do.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 165-166.

Here again, is the “truth,” even if it might not be palatable to white people. They both need to see and to live the will of God. God, Logan explains to Clark, does not segregate in heaven. He wants people to understand their connection and their humanity on earth, and this will have to start with white people.

This was a lived behavior for Logan, Clark reveals in the afterword. Clark describes a day when Logan accompanied her mother and her to see Clark’s dying grandmother in the hospital. Together, the three women crept into the room. Clark describes how she was tentative and afraid; this was her grandmother’s deathbed, and everyone in the room knew it. Logan, however, charged forward. Clark’s grandmother reached forward and grabbed Logan’s hand – not that of her daughter or granddaughter.

My gaze fixed on the two hands lying on top of the covers – one black and gnarled due to lifelong labor and delivering more than one thousand babies, the other white and fragile, not only from cancer but from years of inactivity, with painted red fingernails from a recent trip to the beauty parlor. Onnie Lee Logan and my grandmother were both Southern women nearly eighty years old. But my grandmother was the only child of well-to-do parents who lived in an exclusive neighborhood. She had led a privileged life as a daughter and then as a wife. Onnie Lee Logan was the fourteenth of sixteen children who grew up on a farm in the Alabama Black Belt during the Depression. Her life of hard manual labor began when she was a child, picking cotton in her father’s fields. Her hands had done everything. They had milked cows and picked cotton; they had delivered babies and “laid out” corpses for burial. My grandmother’s hands had done little. I mainly remembered them as holding the cigarettes she had started smoking when she was fifteen, the day she was initiated into her high school sorority. As I stood there and watched Onnie coaching my grandmother through death as she had coached so many other women through childbirth, I knew I was witnessing the tragedy of one kind of womanhood and the triumph of another.⁷⁰

The scene that Clark describes is indeed one that is intimate. However, it does not seem coercive as other scenes of Logan’s life does. The triumph of Logan’s kind of womanhood, as Clark described, is the strength that she cultivated throughout her life, and the wisdom that her

⁷⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 197-198.

experiences brought her. Clark describes this as something that her grandmother is lacking. And what is particularly striking is how Clark describes Logan as coaching her grandmother “through death as she had coached so many other women through childbirth.” Logan believed that in heaven she would be equal to, and a sister to, women like Clark’s grandmother, and that God would want her to express that on earth. So she did. The grace that Logan brought to Clark’s grandmother’s final days was a true form of intimacy.

Whether Logan clutching the hand of Clark’s dying grandmother, or as Logan related it, Logan’s mother and her white neighbor breastfeeding each other’s children, moments of genuine intimacy existed even in a landscape marked by racism, violence, and coercive intimacy between races. These moments, however, were fleeting and represented an ideal future. They did not erase the ugly marks of racism that were etched into Logan’s life and which Logan revealed carefully. What these moments illustrate, however, is a piece of what Logan envisions is heaven on earth: beings created equally by God, showing each other the love that he bestowed upon them all.

Chapter 2 - "The Wonderfulest Thing": Nurturing, Mothering, Relaying, and Logan's Progressive Traditionalism

Up until the end of her life, Onnie Lee Logan could picture the way her mother dressed. She remembered long dresses, skimming ankles and occasionally the floor. Long dresses were covered by a long apron, meant to keep the dress below in as pristine condition as could be managed. The sleeves were long like the skirts with any hint of skin covered. In Alabama, where the summer temperatures can easily break one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, with humidity that can make a clear day feel like being stuck in a steaming pot, these dresses must have been incredibly uncomfortable. One can imagine yards of calico, damp with sweat, sticking to hot skin, twisting around as a woman bent over a steaming pot of food or chased a child around the yard.

Logan, in *Motherwit*, describes the way her mother dressed at both home and when she visited clients as a midwife. However, the uniform above was not related to a career, but rather tied to gender. Women of Logan's age were expected to adhere to many gender related standards, and dress was certainly one of them. This was just how it was.

In those days, that's the way since they was a woman. That's the way they wore their clothes since they were women and chil'rens. A wife and mother wore their dresses long always, even in summer. Most women would look like this anyway especially the midwife with them long aprons.⁷¹

While Logan makes sure to distinguish that midwives, like her mother, were the ones who wore the long aprons, she is clear to define the clothing as related to gender before profession.

For Logan, being a woman as well as being a midwife, carried crucial responsibilities and offered considerable emotional rewards. Older black women in this profession more than just wore long skirts, they represented the glue that held together the community. Whether or not

⁷¹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 49.

they were biological mothers, they took on maternal roles; this meant explaining the world to children, it meant care-taking both them and men, and it offered a position, then, of well-earned respect.

As a child, Logan practiced ironing. Along with her sisters, she padded a plain board, put a white sheet on top of it, placed it in a window, and learned to iron. Logan, however, was not the most talented of her sisters when it came to ironing. That distinction went to one of her many sisters, one who remained an old maid until late in her life. When Logan tells this story, a pattern begins to emerge in the way she describes the women in her life along with herself. Compared to her brothers, every story of her sisters is centered around their eventual roles as wives and mothers, paired with definitions of their aptitude as housekeepers.

Ada, born after Amos, was Logan's family's oldest girl. Described as an "old maid," Logan talks about how she had boyfriends, but no one wanted to marry her until she was in her 50s.⁷² Ada, Logan emphasizes, was a good girl. She went to church, took care of their father after their mother passed away, and embodied all the characteristics a southern woman should. "She was just a mother," Logan said. "She had boyfriends in her early twenties. Nobody that wanted to marry her but she did have boyfriends... she was an old maid. Sweet old maid." Even though Logan describes her as a "sweet old maid," Ada did eventually marry. When she was in her fifties, she married a man named James Adam, a widowed deacon from their church. "... she just thought it was the wonderfulest thing," Logan says.⁷³

Logan's words when describing her sister Ada could easily be interpreted as dismissive. However, when taken into not only the context of the rest of the explanation of Ada's life, but of *Motherwit* in general, this is more admiration than critique. To be a mother was high praise,

⁷² Logan, *Motherwit*, 30.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 31.

especially when viewed in the context of Ada not marrying until later in her life, and not having any children of her own, Logan's words are an act of homage. This is what a good woman – married or not – should be.

Logan tells the stories of her sisters through their relationships; she saw them all as successful. Ida's story was like Ada's. Another one of the older children, she married and had five children. Her husband worked at the sawmill.⁷⁴ This is largely where Ida's story ends in Logan's memoir. Nettie was the daughter after Ida. Logan mentions that she went to school and was married before World War I. Her husband came home sick from the war, but they remained married and had four children together.⁷⁵ The next sister, Laura, is described as going "through pretty near the same procedure."⁷⁶ She also married and had four children, and she and her husband moved to Bessemer to work for Purina.⁷⁷

Distinctions between sisters are few. Betty, the next sister, received even less discussion than the older girls. Logan speaks of her in two sentences, saying that she had six children, and was "the chubby one."⁷⁸ Lily Mae, another sister of Logan's, was born after Lummy. She is described as having one son and experiencing several miscarriages. She took pneumonia and died when her son was seven months old. This led Logan's story to her next sister, Evie Louise, who raised Lily Mae's son alongside her own baby.⁷⁹ At this point Logan references herself, Onnie, the 14th child, before briefly discussing Bernice, the 15th child, who owned a "pressin

⁷⁴ Logan, *Motherwit*, 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 36.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

cleaners” with her husband in Prichard, the same suburb of Mobile, Alabama, where Logan lived.⁸⁰

The stories that Logan shares of her sisters provide a good example of the way that women in the 1900s were expected to behave, as well as an example of how Logan saw ideal forms of gender expression. All of Logan’s sisters, without fail, are defined in terms of marriage and motherhood. Marriage was an important part of southern womanhood, and it is clear in the way that Logan discusses it that it was an important part of her family’s values as well.

Logan offers no critique of the expectation that black women would marry and sustain black men and families. It was, for her, their unquestioned destiny. During the lifetimes of Logan and her sisters, women were expected to marry. Women who did not marry by choice were looked at with suspicion, and women who did not marry for reasons not of their own choosing, like Logan’s “sweet old maid” sister Ada, were regarded with pity. By the 1930s, when Logan herself was entering her first marriage, some began to argue that the act of remaining single fell into the realm of “conjugal misconduct.” Historian William Kuby explains how during the 1930s, educators “publicly denounced the private lives of unmarried individuals and childless couples as threats to public policy.”⁸¹ Kuby then goes on to discuss how hostility toward unmarried women was not a new phenomenon. One of the reasons that hostility existed towards unmarried women was because of their existence outside of a patriarchal environment. As Kuby outlines, writers like Margaret Culkin Banning warned readers that single women were nearly impossible to distinguish from married women in terms of dress and mannerisms. Self-sufficiency, when practiced by women, was threatening.

⁸⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 36.

⁸¹ William Kuby, *Conjugal Misconduct Defying Marriage Law in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 243.

In the deeply religious south, women's main roles were as mothers, and it often caused hardship and heartbreak when this role was not able to be fulfilled, such as in the case of Logan's sister Ada. Overall, pregnancy and motherhood made up a good portion of many women's lives.⁸² One obvious example of this is Logan's own mother, who had 15 children over the span of almost 30 years. Logan's mother died while her own children were still young - Logan herself was not yet in high school when her mother passed away. When Logan speaks of her mother in *Motherwit*, she describes a woman who had an incredible amount of responsibilities, most of which were related to raising children. Her mother tended to the farm animals, raising and butchering them to prepare for her family to eat. She kept house, provided religious instruction, taught her daughters how to be good wives and mothers, and even, occasionally, found time to amuse her children by playing the accordion.⁸³ Logan's mother clearly put much time, effort, and care into motherhood. In relating her life, Logan infuses her memory with deep respect; her work was good work and she did it well.

Logan's mother also worked as a midwife, not only to help support her family, but to share her talents and skills with her community at large. Logan's mother was one of many working mothers in the south, a large portion of whom were black women. Work was gendered in the south, particularly in the early 1900s, when Logan's mother was working, and Logan was beginning her own career training. Many of the careers deemed acceptable for women still exist today, and many of the gender roles and expectations that were in place when Logan's mother was in the workforce still exist today. One of these jobs was nursing.

⁸² Amy R. W. Meyers, Margaret Beck. Pritchard, and Mark Catesby, *Empires Nature: Mark Catesbys New World Vision* (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 121.

⁸³ Logan, *Motherwit*, 15.

Nursing was an integral part of the rural south and the United States as a whole.⁸⁴ While nursing was still a relatively new profession, nurses played an incredibly important role in urban and rural areas alike. In rural areas, like the ones that made up most of Alabama, nursing roles shifted given the context. In *Nursing Rural America: Perspectives from the Early 20th Century*, John C. Kirchgessner and Arlene Wynbeek Keeling discuss the specific challenges that faced rural nurses. “Rural nursing is *generalist* nursing, not to be mistaken for mundane, and includes an intensity of purpose that makes it distinctive.”⁸⁵ Women who were nurses in rural areas like Sweet Water had to be well educated, ready to deal with any situation that might arise – from snake bites to broken bones to childbirth – and above all, had to be women.

Logan embraced the work of nursing in all its forms. The word nurse itself relates back to nurturing. Derived from the Latin “nutrire,” which means to suckle, the original nurses were wet nurses, women who breastfed other women’s infants and children.⁸⁶ Women, seen by Logan and others as natural nurturers, became the ideal sex to nurse individuals back to health. Logan herself discusses how, as a child, she wanted to be a nurse, and practiced by pretending to heal her baby doll from illnesses. “I’ve always from a lil girl wanted to be a nurse. Bein a nurse started young when I was a child, nursin my lil sick baby doll,”⁸⁷ she wrote. After describing at length how dolls were made, she continues the story of nursing her baby doll.

The doll I had was always sick. That deal with me all the time. I was always a nurse for my baby cause my baby was always sick. That was when it began when I was that young. The Lord deal to me in visions to be a person to he’p somebody. When I was young I had that vision over and over and over again. I’d get those visions that my doll was sick and I was the nurse with the doll... It was my doll when I’s very little.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ John C. Kirchgessner and Arlene Wynbeek Keeling, *Nursing Rural America: Perspectives from the Early 20th Century* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015), 64.

⁸⁵ Kirchgessner and Keeling, *Nursing Rural America*, xiii.

⁸⁶ Merriam Webster, s.v. “Nurse:” accessed April 1st, 2020 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nurse>

⁸⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 68.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 69.

For Logan, success was being a person who could “he’p somebody.” While Logan believed that the God instilled in her, from an early age, the desire to heal and tend to sick people (even sick baby dolls), Logan did not end up being a career nurse. Instead, she ended up in another, equally gendered career: midwifery.

Childbirth, historically, has been a female-centered and gendered subject. For centuries, birth was the domain of women, existing in bedrooms, birth huts, and red tents, with birthing women surrounded by female relatives and attended to by a female midwife. By the time Logan was nursing her baby doll, however, medicalized birth was becoming more and more common in the United States, even in the rural United States where Logan grew up. Birth becoming medicalized meant that for the first time in many areas, birth became the domain of the doctor instead of the midwife.⁸⁹

Despite this change, midwives were still common, and being a midwife or nurse was an acceptable – and accessible - profession for women.⁹⁰ Logan’s own mother was a community midwife and Logan, quite obviously, ended up following in her footsteps. While Logan and her mother practiced in different ways, with Logan being supervised and licensed by the state of Alabama instead of practicing independently like her mother and grandmothers, midwifery was then, as it remains now, a gendered profession practiced by women.⁹¹ While the name “midwife” itself means “with woman,”⁹² the very name evokes a gendered practice. Midwives guided

⁸⁹ Charlotte G. Borst, *Catching Babies: The Professionalization of Childbirth, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 117.

⁹⁰ Borst, *Catching Babies*, 179.

⁹¹ This is something that remains to this day – according to a report by Vanderbilt University, The American College of Nurse-Midwives in 2008 reported that only 0.6% of its members were men.

https://nursing.vanderbilt.edu/msn/pdf/nmw_midwiferyformen.pdf

⁹² Merriam Webster, s.v. “Midwife,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/midwife> accessed April 2, 2020

women into the first stage of motherhood, which was perhaps the most gendered and most important role women in Logan's world could play.

Mothering, while not a paid profession,⁹³ was certainly one of the more gender specific and common roles that women in the south and beyond encountered in their lifetimes. As it is now, as it was then, and perhaps as it will be in the future, every human alive came from a mother in some form or fashion.⁹⁴ In the rural south, where Logan was born, motherhood was a necessity because children were a necessity. As noted above, Logan's mother gave birth, over her lifetime, to fifteen children. Many of her older children were married with their own children when she was experiencing her own later pregnancies. These were certainly not circumstances unique to Logan's household. Farming families, whether in the North or in the South, needed to be large. Bodies were necessary to work the farm, to tend animals, and to help harvest crops. Motherhood, thus, was a family imperative.

Despite Logan's birth happening nearly one hundred and ten years ago, many realities that applied to her and her family are sadly still applicable today. In scholar Barbara Katz Rothman's text, *Recreating Motherhood*, she states the following after a discussion of race and class as it applies to motherhood:

But even if we, as a people, want children, or at least a certain kind of children, does that mean we want to mother them? Does that mean that we support the people who do that mothering? Mothering, the actual work of it... is underpaid and undervalued work. The child is the product, and the product of that work may well be valued, but that doesn't mean that the work itself, or the worker itself, is valued.⁹⁵

⁹³ Though one could certainly argue that motherhood is one of the most demanding careers that exists and should be compensated accordingly.

⁹⁴ A beautiful excerpt from *Recreating Motherhood* states: "There is a phrase that they use in medicine that intrigues me: the products of conception. It is medical language for what you get when sperm joins egg – in a loving waiting mother, in a frightened teenager, in a hired woman, or in a petri dish – the results are the "products of conception."

⁹⁵ Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 12-13

As Rothman states, even if children are valued, motherhood and the work that goes into mothering is not. Logan's mother almost certainly faced this. Even if her own family appreciated the effort that went into raising such a large family on a large farm, society most likely did not. Added to that is the fact that as a black family, Logan's mother birthed and raised children that had their livelihoods, reputations, and even their lives threatened on a regular basis. Black motherhood, though certainly rewarding, was an especially fraught state of being with its own sets of challenges.

All of this is not to say, however, that Logan's mother, and later Logan herself, did not experience joy in motherhood. Logan revels in telling stories of her mother; how much she loved all her children, how she taught her daughters how to care for themselves and others, and how she took pride in her career as a midwife. For Logan, clearly, a central role for mothers is that of storytelling:

Mother tried to give us the best thing to grow up on. She loved to get us around her sittin on the flo around her and she start tellin us these things that would he'p us. She would just sit us round and she'd start tellin us these stories about her mother-in-law that was such a good midwife...⁹⁶

Logan paints a picture here that is lovely and warm – several small children gathered around their mother, perhaps in front of a warm fire, spread out on a hand sewn quilt, listening intently while she told them stories of their grandmother, an esteemed midwife. Surely this was a pleasure of motherhood that Logan's mother experienced, and Logan treasured all her life. *Motherwit*, significantly, was Logan's contribution; the readers she imagined, perhaps, surrounded her on the floor, and she is telling us “things that would he'p us.”

Daughters played important parts of households as they learned how to help. One of the earliest and most obvious examples of how girls encountered gendered expectations in their

⁹⁶ Logan, *Motherwit*, 47.

families came in the form of chores. In the 1900s, daughters were expected to assist their mothers with ubiquitous daily tasks. This could include looking after younger siblings and helping in running the household in preparation for their own turns as wives and mothers. In Logan's case particularly, her sister Ada performed this role well after her mother's death, foregoing marriage and forming her own family in order to act as a mother-figure for the rest of her siblings.⁹⁷

Ada never had any chil'ren. I tell you one reason I think Ada was old maid so long. Mother on her deathbed when God returned her speech told each of us what we were to do. She told Ada "you're the mother now" and to my mind Ada took that to heart just like the rest of us did what Mother told us to do. When she got married she was happy to get married.⁹⁸

Logan does not depict her sister Ada as bewailing her fate; her job was to carry on for her mother. But the moment when she could fulfill a woman's full role – as a wife – was a happy one. Although Ada never had children of her own, then, she clearly took seriously her mother's decree to take care of her siblings like they were her own children. As the eldest daughter in her family, Ada likely faced a greater degree of expectations and responsibilities than her younger sisters did. It truly seems like she acted as an extension of her deceased mother, carrying on the care and tending that she was no longer able to perform. This is what good women did.

As a midwife, Logan's world revolved around women and their bodies. When Logan discusses those bodies in her memoir, she does so in proper, medical terms. In the early portion of *Motherwit*, she tells the story about how her mother explained menstruation to her. By all accounts, her mother was an extremely proper and reserved person. According to Logan, when her mother finally opened up and explained menstruation, Logan had been menstruating for around three months. "Who woulda thought that I would sit down and it come to me exactly how

⁹⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 30.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

to fix that and then go hide it up under the house wrapped in paper?” Logan states of her menstrual periods, presumably describing how she hid and disposed of the rags commonly used in the early 1900s to handle menstrual flow.⁹⁹

A mother’s stories functioned as warnings, as well, much as *Motherwit* implicitly does. Logan related how her mother told her and her sisters about sex. Her mother gathered Logan and her sisters up, sat down on the floor, and explained the sexual process to them.

Mother told us about interco’sse. Now she told me that to try to save us. My mother would get us around and she’d sit down and get us around on the flo and relay everything to us. “If you mess around with one a them boys and one a you come up here with a baby I’m go’n kill you. I’m go’n kill you.” I believed what she said.¹⁰⁰

This account makes it clear that unplanned pregnancies would have been extremely controversial and devastating to her family. This is consistent with mainstream views during this time. In historian Ann Fessler’s work, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*, she states that in the early 1900s, women who had children out of wedlock were considered “feebleminded.”¹⁰¹ Social workers in this time period argued that pregnancy out of wedlock not only proved feeblemindedness, but also made unwed mothers a danger to society. With no way to the prove parentage of their children, these women were not always supported as they should have been, and often had to part with their children in painful forced adoptions.

As crucial as woman-centered households were, the absence of a father led to pain. Men had their own gendered expectations within the family system. Fathers, however, were generally not involved in the birth portion of the childbearing experience and became more involved once

⁹⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 51.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁰¹ Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: the Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 144.

their children were born. Some members of Logan's family, however, bucked this expectation and turned gender roles on their heads.

What made the story of Logan's brother-in-law James Adams significant was its exceptionality. Logan discusses at length that her brother-in-law, who had so many children and so little access to midwifery that he himself was licensed as a midwife by the state of Alabama. Logan translates her amusement and admiration for her brother-in-law in remarking on him taking on this role. She and mentions him multiple times over the course of her memoir.¹⁰² Adams, the man who married her sister Ada, the "sweet old maid," had many children by his deceased wife.

That was my brother-in-law that was midwife. It come about this way. When his wife was alive he had so many chil'rens. Bop, bop, bop, bop, bop. His brother bop, bop, bop, bop, bop. Then the chil'rens come on. His older chil'rens. He got tired of tryin to get midwives to deliver chil'rens so he went to the Bo'd a Health and they straightened him up and give him his license. He did it until he was too old to do it. I'm not kiddin. He delivered his own chil'rens babies, his own babies, his brother's wife's babies in the family and then everybody else that called.¹⁰³

This was truly outside of the norm, especially considering that he delivered not only his own children, but his grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and unrelated children as well. James Adams, in his own way, bucked gender norms of the day and became out of sheer determination and necessity, a male midwife.

Other than the rare exception, midwifery was almost by default a feminine career, which is why the story of the male midwife was such an anomaly. During the early 20th century and into the mid-20th century, men were so excluded from the process of birth that they oftentimes did not even witness the births of their own children. Childbirth and other processes related to

¹⁰² Logan, *Motherwit*, 62.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 31.

birth were considered as existing outside the realms of men.¹⁰⁴ While male doctors did deliver children regularly, childbirth was still a realm of the feminine, and fathers dared not to become spectators in the sport of birth. Initially the presence of male doctors in this women's world was an anomaly until midwives themselves became the anomaly.

Logan discusses men attempting to watch the birth of their children and grandchildren as outside of social norms. Implicit to the way she tells these stories is her commitment to a kind of respectful and gendered distancing. Exceptions to that often revealed deeply problematic relationships. One story of a father attempting to witness his daughter giving birth is particularly chilling. Logan determines that the father had impregnated his daughter, and this was given as the cause for him wanting so badly to witness the birth of his child/grandchild.

I delivered once for a girl that was about sixteen years old. I couldn't keep her father out the house where I was deliverin the baby. I couldn't keep him out and I couldn't see the mother. Every once in a while I would see the mother. When it's cool she want the cover over her – all right. But when those contractions get close together they get hot. They don't want no cover at all. They want it off of em. Well this child had got to this stage and I couldn't get the daddy out the room. He stood around in there and he talked. Finally I told him, "You're makin me nervous. I don't get nervous on my job. I don't like daddies standin around their lil girl..." So it rocked on and rocked on. I didn't have time to tell him no mo. When the baby started gotten through, the head like that, he was standin right at my back. After all a me insist that he got outa there he was standing right at my back. I delivered that baby and I told him this. I said, "I've never had a daddy that wanted to see a baby born so bad as much as you did in my life." He knowed then I was beginnin to put two and two together.¹⁰⁵

The picture that Logan paints is a grim one indeed. A laboring sixteen-year-old, a hovering father, and an absent mother. When the covering comes off, the daughter is exposed in a way that she should not be in front of her father. In the end, Logan says, the mother confessed to Logan that her husband had impregnated her daughter. "I wanted to put him under the ground," Logan

¹⁰⁴ Debra Anne Susie, *In the Way of Our Grandmothers: a Cultural View of Twentieth-Century Midwifery in Florida*, (Athens, GA: University Of Georgia Press, 2009), 77.

¹⁰⁵ Logan, *Motherwit*, 111-112.

says. “Not in jail but under the ground.”¹⁰⁶ The fury that Logan felt at this situation was surely overwhelming. The fact that she tells the story is notable. This is one way to reinforce what is proper behavior; to protest the breaking down of protected, woman-only spaces.

Despite the ability of fathers to be spectators, only mothers experienced birth firsthand during Logan’s career as a midwife.¹⁰⁷ Logan does tell stories of loving, involved fathers, including her own. Men of Logan’s time also faced their own gendered expectations. Like two sides of a coin. Logan implies, experiences and expectations that women faced had an opposite side that their male counterparts encountered. Women gave birth, men were expected to either not be present for their child’s birth, or be a quiet spectator, out of the way. Mothers and wives were expected to tend house, raise children, and bring in money, while fathers and husbands were expected to meet the same needs, albeit in different ways. Logan believed this and clearly viewed her father as an exceptional provider. She talks at length, especially in the early parts of *Motherwit*, of how great of a provider he was: she mentions the land that he farmed, the buggy and the later automobile he owned, and the way members of their communities loved him. He fulfilled his gendered expectations well.

Despite such extensive discussion of the concept of gender and how it impacted Logan and her family at large, the word gender does not appear once within the pages of *Motherwit*. It is safe assumption that Logan did not think about gender in the way that many people today do. Logan does not call for the breaking down of gendered boundaries: she describes a world of shared respect, of taking on and taking pride in gendered responsibilities. As discussed in other

¹⁰⁶ Logan, *Motherwit*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ It must be stated that gender expectations and norms around birth are shifting in the 21st century. Many midwives are leading the charge to make gender-inclusive language and education surrounding birth -including trans and non-binary birth and lactation- normative. During the time Logan was practicing, these circumstances most likely would not have been anything she would have been exposed to or knowledgeable about. <https://mana.org/healthcare-policy/use-of-inclusive-language>

parts of this work, Logan did not appear to consider herself a feminist, despite her work being praised within feminist circles. In many ways, Logan appears to cling to certain gender roles. One example of this is how seriously she took her role as wife to her husband Joe.

After the release of *Motherwit*, Logan met with media attention in a way that she certainly never had before. She did not, however, let the book change the way she preferred to live her life. According to Katherine Clark, after the release of the book, Alabama Public Television began filming a documentary on Logan's life. During the filming process, the crew drove to Logan's home in Mobile, set up cameras on her front porch, and were in the middle of shooting one day when Logan's husband came home from work. Logan immediately forgot about the cameras. In the middle of filming, she got up, said she had to see Joe, and walked into the house. Clark was sure something bad had happened.

I followed her inside to ask what was wrong. Nothing was wrong; she just had to fix Joe his lunch. In amazement I followed her back to the kitchen. "You're not going to fix Joe's lunch *now*, are you?" I asked. "Of course I am, honey. I always fix Joe his lunch at this time of day." "But today? When the television people are here? Can't Joe go get himself some lunch somewhere? Couldn't he go to Popeyes to get some fried chicken? Just this once?" She stopped. "Let me tell you one thing," she said. "Joe can't eat no Popeyes fried chicken. That would tear his stomach up from now till the end of this week." (Joe did have a problem with stomach ulcers.) "But now let me ask you this," she said, confronting me as she always did when I was being "young and stupid," as she often called me. "Why would I stop doing what I have always done? This is how Joe and I get along. I ain't about to stop being who I have always been. Not at this age."¹⁰⁸

Logan's refusal to alter her routine and forgo preparing her husband's lunch could be seen by some as an extreme adherence to gender roles, especially ones related to serving men. However, this can also be interpreted as a fierce loyalty to her own independence. Logan did not let the desires of others, particularly Clark and the crew from Alabama Public Television, dictate how she was going to behave.

¹⁰⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, 193.

This moment again reveals a great deal both about Logan and about her relationship with Clark. If the responsibilities of a wife did not figure significantly in *Motherwit*, they were understood, something Logan felt she should not have to translate to Clark. Her calling her “young and stupid,” despite the way it sounds, was more affectionate than demeaning. Clark was like her readers and her mother’s children, sitting on the floor to be taught. They were all young and stupid then. When Clark grew, she would – Logan implies – come to know herself, who “she had always been,” and she would know what worked for her, and would not stop doing that to feed into anyone else’s expectations.

Logan also demonstrates this belief in independence and self-reliance in other ways. In one of the most touching parts of *Motherwit*, Logan discusses how she acted as a counselor to the “young people” in her church. This was clearly a role that Logan cherished, and she used her work experience to counsel the young women of her congregation. Again, this memoir should be read as another opportunity for counsel, particularly to encourage the respectful (white) “young and stupid” to live more thoughtful, generous lives.

As a midwife, Logan encountered out of wedlock pregnancies and births often. In the time that Logan was practicing, this was, as discussed earlier in this chapter, often devastating to both the single mother and her family and community at large. Logan states that she always “lectured” the unwed mothers she served after their births, and she took it upon herself to also warn the young women of her congregation against these circumstances.¹⁰⁹ The advice that Logan gave these young women, however, was not to settle down and marry early. Instead, Logan encouraged independence and growth.

¹⁰⁹ Logan said in *Motherwit* that she never was “making fun” of an unwed mother, and ended her lectures by saying how fine their babies were, and how now they had a good reason to settle down, “knuckle down to it,” and raise their children like the grown women they were. This seems to be an encouraging approach.

I love to talk to young girls even befo it happens because I am counselor over the young people of my church and has been for years and I always stayed on those girls about what would happen. I would tell em they should try to stay natural girls. Take their time and keep their mind focused on somethin else besides boys all the time. I tell em that if they would take time with their life, nature wouldn't overpower em to let em want to have feelin's with boys or mens. If you would laugh and talk about the good things in life and leave that aside until you grow up to it or get married you wouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusion with a boy or with a man that's gonna get you pregnant. The first thing you know you'll be comin up with a child. I constantly tells em that. "Stay in your own category. Laugh about school, about books, about this, and about that and don't be so quick to get so close to a man..."¹¹⁰

Even given her traditional choices, it's telling that Logan's advice to the young women she counseled was to learn, to grow, to laugh about school and books with their friends, and to not make their lives center around men at too early of an age. For Logan, laughing and talking are "natural" to young women too, just as desire is.

Despite later being heralded as a "favorite of feminist circles," Logan does not once mention feminism in her memoir. Additionally, Logan seems at first glance to have an unadulterated and traditional view of gender. She embraces conventional gender roles both inside and outside her memoir and she seems to define the women in her life by their relationship to men and to children. Yet Logan revels in the way that female bodies can become pregnant and give birth; did not depict – or seems to see, in her work with Clark – women as weak or incapable. She found birth empowering and sought to embolden those around her to give birth in a way that fulfilled their desires, even at the risk of defying state laws. Her entire life was female-centered in a way that few are. While her views of gender were certainly traditional when compared to the more complex analysis of gender that is becoming more common now, in her context she described central and powerful roles for mothers, the central story-tellers of the family.

¹¹⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 116.

Logan defied gender roles while also embracing them. Logan divorced her first husband in an age when divorce was still very controversial; she knew she deserved better than what he could give. She supported herself for many years and had a career that she was proud of, one she considered her calling. She mentored young women in her community and counseled them to improve themselves, their educational situations, and to cultivate their own happiness outside of men before settling down. Logan, like so many other women throughout history, described women as curtailed in some sense – too eager to jump into adulthood – but as central and powerful in others.

Chapter 3 - “A Little Black Girl God Has Blessed”: Logan’s Religious Worldview

On a beautiful day one early Alabama fall, when the crops had been laid to dry and the weather was still warm, young Onnie put on her best Sunday dress. Her mother gave her a long gown made of yellow cheesecloth, light mesh, and tied a string around the bottom hem to keep her skirts from floating up when she entered the water. Together, along with the rest of her family and the congregants of her church, they made their way down to a creek. The creek was beautiful, the landscape cleaned of trash and debris, and the congregants gathered to watch the deacons of the church lead children down to the water. Logan was baptized that day. Along with many other children in the church, she took slow, short steps, tiptoeing in, before the pastor dunked her under the flowing water, symbolically washing her sins away.¹¹¹

This was not the beginning of Logan’s spiritual journey, nor was it the end. As evidenced by her writings, Onnie Lee Logan was a deeply religious woman. Logan was raised as part of a strict, religious family. While the denomination that her family was a part of growing up is unknown, as an adult she was a member of a southern Baptist church. Her relationship with God, the church, and Christianity touched every aspect of her existence. She filtered her worldview through a religious lens for her entire life. Because of this upbringing, Logan used religion as a tool to understand the world, receive information, and relate to those around her. Logan, however, was not just a Christian. She was a black Christian woman, raised with the religious beliefs that her community and family embraced. These beliefs were particularly influential in the “Bible Belt” states of the United States.

¹¹¹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 22-23.

Religion made up the cornerstone of Logan's life. Many of the stories that she shared in her biography center around her religious childhood and her adult beliefs. These beliefs impacted not only her personal life, but also her career as a midwife as well. For example, she tells the story of taking care of her husband's dying grandmother, who was also a midwife. According to Logan, on her deathbed, her husband's grandmother kept exclaiming that she couldn't "get by for all the lil babies."¹¹² Logan took this to mean that the souls of babies that her grandmother had assisted in aborting were keeping her from entering heaven. For this reason, Logan refrained from assisting in any abortions during her career as a midwife.

Beyond the impact on her midwifery career, this story also speaks volumes about the religious aspect of Logan's life. As a Christian woman who believed in the concepts of heaven and hell, and who had been taught to believe in those concepts for her whole life, Logan's religious beliefs factored into every aspect of her existence. *Motherwit* is itself a part of evangelical tradition. Logan used her memoir as a way to reinforce God's presence in her life and counsel her readers towards an understanding of the world as informed by God. This, too, was a form of nurturing very much informed by her sense of black womanhood.

For Logan and many others, religion made up a significant part of life in the United States. While culture was beginning to shift into a more multi-religious and non-religious mainstream religion remained a guiding force in the United States in the early 20th century. Religion played a major role in politics, culture, and art, with Protestant Christianity in particular still guiding what was deemed culturally acceptable.¹¹³ From coins printed with "In God We

¹¹² Logan, *Motherwit*, 120.

¹¹³ Mark Hulsether, *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007),183.

Trust” to 60% of the population claiming membership in a Christian church, Christianity dominated the United States during Logan’s adult life.¹¹⁴

Much as it is now, the American south in the 20th century was dominated by Protestant Christianity. Immediately after the Civil War, levels of church membership rose quickly in the former Confederate states. Many of the churches that saw enrollment spikes were Baptist and Methodist. Other denominations, such as Churches of Christ, holiness, and Pentecostal churches, thrived in more rural areas.¹¹⁵

Religion transcended the boundaries of churches and creek bed baptisms. For example, Williams argues that in addition to spiking enrollment in Christian churches, the South also experienced a rise in civil religion post-Civil War. Described as “The Religion of the Lost Cause” by historian Charles Reagan Wilson, this was a tendency to view the Civil War as a “baptism in blood.” This, in turn, caused this cult to build upon the viewpoint that the South was morally superior to the North. This cult had religious ties, and Wilson contends that religious leaders (led by Protestant Christians, but joined by unlikely allies such as southern Jews and Catholics) were some of the main community influencers of this cult.¹¹⁶ Expressing itself in the form of statues of Confederate war heroes, the founding of societies such as the Daughters of the Confederacy, and other public activities, this cult still operates today. Then, as it is now, excluding black southerners and perpetuating racism is one of the consequences of this cult’s operation.

¹¹⁴ Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: a World History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 115.

¹¹⁵ Peter W. Williams, *Americas Religions: from Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century*, (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 289.

¹¹⁶ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 34.

Black southern traditions flourished as well, despite this hostile environment. Church accounted for a large portion of social activities, even as they were most often segregated, , and Christianity influenced politics and social expression on an intense level.¹¹⁷ It was during the Reconstruction period that the social gospel began to flourish, with Christians of this particular creed believing that they could hurry on the second coming of Jesus Christ by tackling social ills like poverty, alcohol, crime, slums, and other social injustices.¹¹⁸ Evangelicalism, in particular, rose to prominence during Logan's early years.

Evangelical Christians, explained briefly, believe that Christians are tasked with sharing the gospel with the world in order to convert as many individuals as possible in order to save them from being punished for eternity in hell. Fundamentalism is a Christian movement where adherents believe exclusively in the infallibility of the Bible and rejects more liberal theology. This view has dominated Evangelicalism after 1910, the year Logan believed she was born. Given her age, region, and commitments it must have surely influenced her perspective on the world. This was the religious landscape which Logan lived her entire life. By means of radio, traveling preachers, and revivals, fundamentalist Christianity swept even the most rural parts of the south.

Black and white southerners shared some religious experiences. Both groups enjoyed passionate sermons, gospel singing, hymns, folk music, and baptisms. Accounts exist of white churches inviting black congregants to join them for services, and there are even accounts of unofficially unsegregated churches, especially in rural and mountainous regions. In many ways, religion was a unifying force. However, it was used as a tool of segregation as well. Despite

¹¹⁷ Paul Harvey, *Freedoms Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013,) 50.

¹¹⁸ Cecelia Tichi, *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. Of North Carolina Pr, 2011,) 221.

shared cultural experiences and norms, despite worshipping in the same places on occasion, religion during the Civil War into Reconstruction and later was often used to enforce the racial status quo. Segregated worship was one of the many forces used to implement the separation of black and white society.

Throughout *Motherwit*, Logan offers clear examples of how she was “raised religiously.” “I really didn’t know no other way,” she explained to Clark. “I didn’t want to know no other way in fact.”¹¹⁹ The way that Logan offers this is telling: the first sentence is almost apologetic, the second more decided. Given the way Logan relates her memoir, it seems as though she presumes that Clark may not share her sensibility. But here, she asserts implicitly, is the right way, and she does not want to know any other. As noted, this was well-established when Logan was a child. Logan states that her family, like many other families during this time, practiced what she refers to as “home church” in addition to attending a regular, brick and mortar church on Sundays. During home church meetings, her family gathered, sang church songs, and read scripture. Her mother and father attempted to explain those scriptures the best they could to their children.¹²⁰ In addition to these home churching sessions, Logan wrote about her experience attending Sunday school, having special clothes for church, and enjoying the beautiful services.¹²¹

Religious experiences and events such as baptisms, much like Logan’s own baptism, were particularly important to black churchgoers. Historian Valerie Grim writes how events such as baptisms were important community events.

Church related festivals encouraged rural African Americans’ energy and talents in different ways. Emphasis was on meeting spiritual needs through baptismal ceremonies, weddings, funerals, church anniversaries, reunions, and carnival

¹¹⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 21.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 22.

¹²¹ Ibid, 21.

associations. While many of these events might be perceived as religious or social, the ways in which rural blacks expressed themselves were cultural.¹²²

Grim goes on to describe baptismal scenes like the one Logan described, with preachers dressed in white leading feasting, prayer, and dancing. Feeding the soul was considered just as important as feeding the body to many rural Christians, including black Christians. Logan's family certainly felt the same.

Everyone, it seemed, was set a'quiver when the revival came to town. Permits were acquired if necessary. Lumber was purchased to make benches, platforms and pulpits. Someone rode through town looking for a piano with an owner who was willing to lend it out; tent poles were pounded into position; and great swaths of canvas were hoisted up towards the bright blue sky. When the tent was raised, the pulpit and pews steady, and the pastor rode into town, the revival began.¹²³ Logan mentions revivals like these, which are fixtures of rural Alabama to this day.

Revivals were and are designated periods of time where the church and community came together to hear a minister, oftentimes a traveling one, preach the word of God. Music, socialization, baptisms, and other significant religious events often took place during these revivals.¹²⁴ In Alabama in particular, revivals played a role in not only increasing church attendance and "winning souls," but even assisted in growing mission fields and increasing baptism rates. In the early 1920s, when Logan was around ten, leaders in the Alabama Baptist

¹²² Ray Douglas Hurt, *African American Life in the Rural South: 1900-1950*, (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003), 116.

¹²³ Josh McMullen, *Under the Big Top: Big Tent Revivalism and American Culture, 1885-1925*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 25.

¹²⁴ John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Lexington (Ky.): The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 111.

association (Baptists are a strong Evangelical denomination) noticed that enrollment in white Baptist churches was stalling.

Historian Wayne Flint describes how between 1921 and 1922 a decline in enrollment worried white Evangelical leaders. Enrollment in churches across the state stalled or dropped altogether.

Total baptisms in 1920 reached 20,000, a figure comparable to some years during the 1980s and 1990s. The following two years (1921 and 1922) brought a marked decline that disturbed denominational leaders. Of some 2,000 white Baptist churches, nearly one-fourth reported not a single addition and another fourth added less than five.¹²⁵

Ironically enough, it was deduced that the high number of baptisms, conversions, and church enrollments that happened at revivals artificially inflated numbers across the denomination. The issue of revival numbers, while perhaps a portion of declining enrollment, was not the only force behind dropping numbers. Professions that required work on Sunday, along with “automobiles and movies, the popularity of football and professional baseball – all reduced the importance of church to a community’s social life.” This, combined with the rising importance of “science, psychology, and history” in public schools also drove enrollment down and lessened, however slightly, the importance of religion in daily American life.¹²⁶

Despite enrollment woes and artificially inflated baptism numbers, churches across the south had multiple ways for congregants to participate. One was through “Sunbeams,” a church group for young children that was like the Girl or Boy Scouts with a decidedly religious twist. Started by a woman named Anna Louise Elsom, who taught children's classes at Fairmont Baptist Church in Nelson County, Virginia, the Sunbeams are still operating in churches across

¹²⁵ Wayne Flint, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*, (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 323.

¹²⁶ Flint, *Alabama Baptists*, 323-324.

the country to this day. The Women's Mission Union, a women's organization still active in the Southern Baptist landscape, took over Elsom's vision and expanded it. Logan participated in Sunbeams, learning songs and socializing with other children her age. Logan mentions Sunbeams fondly, even stating that she eventually came to be the treasurer of the "lil Sunbeam band."¹²⁷ This, paired with Logan's other early exposures to Christianity, set the course for Logan's lifelong passion for her Christian faith.

Religion was nurtured from birth in Logan, and Logan applies her beliefs to every part of her life, including birth. She always ascribed that miracle to God. In *Motherwit* alone, the word *God* appears upwards of 150 times, and Mrs. Logan credits many aspects of her own work to God's grace. When Logan describes births that she attended, she often couches them in terms of faith. A good example of this is Logan's description of the first birth that she worked along as a midwife. The mother, a friend of Logan's, asked Logan to attend her birth, which turned out to be a complicated delivery:

It was breeched, my very first baby. And that didn't scare me at all. I've never had a job that scared me. I do believe and I do know there is a higher power. And He certainly will direct yo path if you let Him. If you will trust Him, if you will serve Him, He will direct yo path. He's not gonna let you make a mistake as long as you're workin in His name.¹²⁸

Logan goes on to describe how difficult it was to tell that a baby was breech. She, like other midwives, relied on manual exams of the mother to determine head position and looked for signs such as the passing of meconium¹²⁹ to signal breech births. Once Logan recognized that this birth

¹²⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 23.

¹²⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, 91.

¹²⁹ Meconium is the first feces that an infant passes after delivery. The passing of meconium in utero, marked by dark brown or green stained amniotic fluid, is a sign of fetal distress and can be indicative of serious complications. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK542240/>

was presenting breech, she called the doctor. The doctor notified her that he was on his way to assist.¹³⁰ Logan continued:

But he didn't have to come. The Lord said, "Now you don't need Dr. Muskat. You can handle this," and there was the baby. About three or fo minutes later I had delivered that breech birth and that was my first baby and I did it all by myself. Beautiful. Befo that doctor could get outa bed at two o'clock in the morning, befo he could get outa bed and get dressed, I had the privilege of callin him back and tellin him everything was fine and the baby was here and mother and baby was fine.¹³¹

Logan's devotion to and reliance on her faith is evident in this and many other stories that she shares in her memoir. Birth for Logan was a spiritual experience. What was more, the Lord's help gave her the authority she needed: with his head there was no fear, and there was no need for a white male doctor.

"I do believe and I do know there is a higher power," Logan asserts. She does not only *believe*, she *knows*. Logan felt strongly about her faith in the Lord and she shows her reader the power that this belief gives her. It is, she implies, a power they might have too. Logan no longer simply recounts her faith, she shares it actively, using her personal experiences and convictions to reach out, convince others of the power of her faith, and share the gospel. Again, this could also be interpreted, since *Motherwit* was the transcription of oral interviews with Katherine Clark, as Logan emphasizing to Clark the depth and seriousness of her faith, an emphasis that she clearly believes that she needs.

The stories that Logan describes above occurred during her time practicing as a midwife in Mobile, Alabama, many miles from her native Sweet Water. There Logan attended Truevine

¹³⁰ Breech births, when an infant presents in the birth canal either feet or buttocks first, can pose danger to both the infant and delivering mother. <https://americanpregnancy.org/labor-and-birth/breech-presentation/>

¹³¹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 92.

Baptist Church.¹³² Logan continued to attend the small Baptist church on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue in Mobile for most of her adult life. Finally, her funeral services were held there.¹³³ Logan was involved in her church community, being a prominent part of the usher board. She was such a devoted attendee of Truevine that many people knew to call her there if they couldn't reach her at home.¹³⁴ This position, combined with her propensity to attend church whenever she could, led to dedication that was a culmination of not only the religious upbringing that Logan had as a child, but the support she received from the church as an adult. Here is a kind of implied advice: religious communities offer aid and structure in good times and bad.

One of the stories that Logan tells in the later parts of *Motherwit* is the story of her divorce from her husband Elmo. Elmo, Logan later found out, had already been married when he married her and he had never been properly divorced from his first wife. "I kep church work goin all the time to keep me from worryin about the situation that was happening right through then,¹³⁵" Logan states. Her first marriage was not a happy one. She married Elmo, the brother of her sister Evie Louise's husband, when she was twenty-one, and they moved to Magnolia, Alabama, a small but bustling town in Marengo County, near her childhood home. A month later she found out that she was pregnant. Elmo was not a good husband to Logan. He had a wandering eye and numerous extramarital affairs. After they were married for "about three years," Logan describes how he walked away from her and their baby for another woman.

¹³² As of April 3rd, 2020, Truevine Baptist appears to still be in operation, although google has it marked as "permanently closed." According to the church's Facebook page, which has 97 followers, Pastor Sandy McQueen is now giving video sermons in compliance with the Covid-19 pandemic social distancing guidelines. One can only wonder what Logan would think of video sermons, but I have a feeling she would be pleased that congregants could still hear sermons while quarantined in their homes; almost a high-tech version of the home church that she and her family participated in when she was a child.

¹³³ During research, I found a picture of Logan's headstone, which revealed the fact that her husband Roosevelt, who died in 1997, was a Master Mason in the Freemason organization. Logan's grave is marked with the symbol of the Order of the Eastern Star, which designates her as a "Worthy Matron."

¹³⁴ Logan, *Motherwit*, 166.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

Notably, Logan described to Clark her feelings about divorce, and how she did not want her marriage to dissolve. This is a vulnerability she offers to her readers, as well: living with dignity, she suggests, is not always easy.

Still, Logan relates, good things happened to Logan in Magnolia as well. It was there that she met a woman named Stephanie¹³⁶ who introduced her to Dr. Guilliard, a physician who would end up asking her to assist him with a delivery. That birth was an opportunity for Logan to tap into her knowledge base and her God given “motherwit.” It also ended up as the final catalyst that pushed Logan into midwifery as a career. At the time when she met Dr. Guilliard, Logan was keeping house for a woman from Meridian, Mississippi, whose husband was employed by the railroad in Frisco City, near Magnolia. While she worked for this woman, Dr. Guilliard visited the woman for prenatal visits. He and Logan struck up conversations about babies, pregnancy, and delivery. When the time came for the baby to be delivered, Dr. Guilliard asked Logan to help him. Only 21 or 22 at the time, Logan knew what to do, readying boiling water for the doctor, assisting him with his gloves, and watching as he tied a sheet around the iron headboard of the bed. This sheet, she explained to her readers, was for the woman to pull on during hard contractions. When a contraction struck, the woman pulled hard, and Logan talked to her, guiding her through the process.

I was up at her head and I was talkin to her while she was havin contractions. I said, “Miss Stephanie, you’re doin fine. Keep yo mind on what you’re doin and I believe that would keep you from screamin.” I kep tellin her to keep an eye on what you’re doin and what’s happenin. That’s the impo’tant thing. And sooner or later it’ll be over with. Not this minute but sooner or later. That contraction will ease. Not knowin what the doctor was thinkin but I kep on with that all the time all the way through. He could hear me when I said, “Don’t push too hard.” And she’d come again. And I’d say,” Use just a lil bit mo pressure.” And I’d say,

¹³⁶ It is unclear whether Stephanie was the woman’s first or last name – Logan only refers to her as “Miss Stephanie.”

“Don’t cut em too sharp. Hold a lil longer. Not too hard but just a lil longer.” I coached her right on through that along with him.¹³⁷

Significantly, Logan recalls giving her own advice, not ceding all authority to the white doctor. After the baby was born, Dr. Guilliard showed Logan how to tie the cord. She explains that at that time, there were no clamps for the umbilical cord, only sterile ties. After Logan finished helping clean the mother and the baby, Dr. Guilliard expressed surprise at how well she handled the birth. “You would make a good midwife,” he told her. “Not only make a good midwife. I think you’ll make a good doctor.” These were the words that set Logan on her life’s path.

The time in Magnolia, however, was tragic as well. After the birth of her first child, Logan suffered a miscarriage; soon after that her relationship with Elmo disintegrated further. While she states that Elmo was never abusive towards her or her son, his constant affairs and time away from home wore on Logan. Logan stated that he also “beat” her father for money and sent it to her without telling her how he got it. It is not clarified in *Motherwit* whether Logan meant that her husband physically attacked her father, or beat him in some sort of wager, bet, or game. She recalls, however, that Elmo and her father had a contentious relationship from the beginning. Logan states: “Daddy never talked too much against him but he would say how sorry he was¹³⁸ and this, that, and the other. Elmo went down and beat my daddy outa some money once. Said that I needed it and sent for it when we were livin in Magnolia and I didn’t even know it. Not at all.”¹³⁹ This surely pained Logan, as she was fond of her father and had a loving relationship with him. Given all he put her through, it is evident that Logan’s first experience with marriage was exceedingly negative, and she did not shield this truth from her reader.

¹³⁷ Logan, *Motherwit*, 79.

¹³⁸ In southern vernacular, Logan’s father is not expressing his own sorrow towards Logan or her husband, but rather stating that Logan’s husband is “sorry,” a slang synonym for useless or bad.

¹³⁹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 83.

Survival meant turning to the Lord, Logan tells Clark and through her, the reader. Belief in the Lord does not shield one from the pain that humans visit on each other, but it can help them recover. The circumstances of her failed first marriage led to Logan living alone in a small house near the railroad tracks in Magnolia and working as a laundress for a woman who lived nearby. Logan earned enough to get a small amount of food for her son and herself, and they survived without her husband.

There was enough to make it there all the time. Enough to survive without the sufferin. You know what? Had I not stuck with the salvation of the Lord and kep him in front to guide, I wouldn't have rose above that. What I cain't do for myself and I don't see my way out I depends on the Lord and it opens up. That's how I survived. That's how I didn't pay no attention to it bein as hard as it was.¹⁴⁰

It was during this time when Logan believed that the Lord had guided her and was providing for her, that she met a midwife. While people must first “do for [them]selves,” Logan explains, when they can not, the Lord is there to depend upon.

The course of Logan's life turned with this help, she asserts. This unnamed midwife allowed Logan to start attending births alongside her. Logan was not always complimentary of this midwife's skills, and states that she was glad that she was not a practicing midwife in this time. Her sense of herself and her belief in her guide allowed Logan to develop her own skills as a midwife. Logan disapproved of some of the common recommendations for labor, including having patients begin pushing too early. Instead, Logan discusses learning from women like her mother, as well as the unnamed midwife and from the Board of Health, while adding that she believed God had given her the knowledge she needed. “I was watchin and takin in what they was sayin but I always see'd it a lil different that you could do or you could add to it,” Logan says. “... That's how I come I say God give it to me. The Bo'd a Health didn't give it to me.

¹⁴⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 84.

Readin books didn't give it to me. I progressed that outa my own mind. My own mind."¹⁴¹ While Logan acknowledges her own instincts, and thus encourages her reader to trust themselves, as always she credits her ultimate success to God.

"I'm just a little black girl that God has blessed," Mrs. Logan stated when Katherine Clark interviewed her. This not only speaks to Logan's views on her religion, but also her understanding of herself as a black woman.¹⁴² It also sends a message to the reader: all these identities make up who Logan is. She is large in spirit and talent, if diminutive in stature; she is blessed by God as both black and as a woman. These identities are inseparable. Clark included this in the conclusion to *Motherwit*. As much as she insists on the respect she deserves, Logan also models a consistent humility. Because she knows that God is responsible for what she was capable. "That's how come I'll never get the big head. I can't take credit for the blessings He give me."¹⁴³ This reliance on God, an unmistakable byproduct of her lifelong faith, also existed side by side in Logan with a strong sense of self and self-worth.

In her afterward, Clark goes on to mention a conversation where she told Logan that she was named in the *Norton's Book of Women's Lives*. This work, an anthology of excerpts from memoirs by women like Anne Frank, Maya Angelou, and Helen Keller, also includes an excerpt from *Motherwit*. Clark remembers sitting down and telling Logan about this book and the other women included in it and telling her "This means you'll go down in history." Logan, Clark states, responded simply with "Honey, I am history." The implication, the affection, translates the sense her readers too can be "history."

¹⁴¹ Logan, *Motherwit*, 85.

¹⁴² Ibid, 194.

¹⁴³ Ibid

It is evident in *Motherwit* that Logan drew upon her faith to give her strength and confidence. Her faith also dictated how she carried out her professional duties. One of the troubling conundrums that Logan encountered in her professional life was desperate young women seeking abortion. Because she worked in the realm of reproductive healthcare, women who felt compelled to terminate their pregnancies sometimes sought her out for assistance. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Mrs. Logan refrained from assisting in abortions because of her religious beliefs, and because of the experience she had in watching her husband's Grandmother die, perhaps thwarted from heaven by the souls of the infants she'd help abort. Religion and abortion had been linked in the minds of many for decades at this point, and it was still a contested point amongst Protestants.

This was even true in Logan's own Baptist faith. Many acclaimed southern Baptist leaders welcomed *Roe v. Wade*, including former Southern Baptist Convention President W.A. Criswell. He stated that he "always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person."¹⁴⁴ Although religious views differed, abortion was decidedly illegal in the south. In Alabama there were 40 prosecutions and 5 convictions of women who had abortions between the 1892 and 1935.¹⁴⁵ When called on to help pregnant girls she again would act as a counselor. This kind of help she would not give.

I had a lot of calls. They get ahold of my phone number that I was a midwife. Some be fo and five months pregnant. And some just when they think they just beginnin or somethin like that. "I just missed my period." "I missed two" or somethin of that nature. "Can you do somethin for me?" I say, "If you wait nine months I'll do somethin for you." They would tell me, "I think I'm pregnant, could you give me somthin? Are you able to take care of it?" I tell em in a minute, "I will deliver you baby, yo nine-months baby. You carry nine months and I'll be

¹⁴⁴ Allan Carlson, "*Children of the Reformation*." Touchstone. Accessed March 29, 2020. <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-04-020-f>.

¹⁴⁵ Samuel W. Buell, *Criminal Abortion Revisited*, 66 *New York University Law Review* 1774-1831 (1991)

glad to deliver but to destroy, I don't know how. I don't want to know how and if I knew how, I wouldn't do it."¹⁴⁶

Taking care, helping, she implies here and to her reader, was one thing; abortion was another.

Logan was occasionally even offered large amounts of money in order to perform abortions. This is when she shared the story of her husband's grandmother. "I know one thing," she states. "You couldn't pay me to destroy a baby."¹⁴⁷ The use of the word "destroy" here is striking. Logan does not choose to use the word "terminate," or "abort", or even "kill". Instead she chooses to use the word destroy, with all the implications that comes with it. To Logan, aborting a fetus was not just the process of terminating a life, but also terminating a soul. In the late 1980s, a decade after *Roe v. Wade*, Logan would undoubtedly understand that some of her readers might have chosen to abort or might feel differently than she does. But this does not dissuade her.

Logan viewed God as being present in labor and deliveries as well as pregnancies. One particularly striking story that Logan shares is about a baby born at nine months gestation that was incredibly small and sickly. Logan begins telling the story of this birth by stating that in her entire career of forty years, she only had one child die. This was that child. While the mother was laboring, her contractions were hard. Logan states that the mother was upset by the pain and became increasingly distressed as it increased. "She just didn't wanna hurt," Logan states. "She just did not want to hurt." During the last phase of labor, the mother exclaimed "Get this goddamn baby outa me." Logan said that after this, "God give it to her all at once." The woman's water broke, and a small baby, smaller than a nine months gestation infant should be, followed the gush of birth waters. Logan said that she felt a faint heartbeat but could not make the baby cry despite her best efforts.

¹⁴⁶ Logan, *Motherwit*, 120.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 121.

The husband was standin right by me and see'd it all. He said "Honey, this just didn't intend to be." Because he was lookin at this lil bitty baby. It couldn't weigh a pound and a quarter. He made me feel so good when he said that because I didn't want to have to say that by myself.¹⁴⁸

Despite best efforts, there was nothing to be done. The comfort the husband offered his wife comforted Logan as well: this way she did not have to be the purveyor of the sad news. "... he was so lil and tiny I knowed it wasn't gonna make it," Logan told Clark. "It lived about three days and died. We got the heartbeat but we couldn't get a breath. That lil thing was so tiny, honey. I declare that it could almost fit in the palm of my hand." The sadness she feels is palpable, but the way she describes the birth offers a kind of healing: it was meant to be. Logan's comments on this story imply that God honored the woman's exclamation by causing the sickly baby.¹⁴⁹ While this belief is certainly not based in any form of science or medicine, it's a striking example of just how involved Logan believed God to be in the daily lives of both herself, and the people around her.

One of the stories that best summarizes the way that Logan was taught to view herself and her faith comes from her early childhood. Logan's mother was a caretaker for a pair of elderly white siblings. They were a brother and sister who had both never married and lived together in an old homestead near Logan's childhood home. The sister, who Logan calls Miss Cynthia, took ill one day. Logan's mother began to care for her day and night, and sometimes took Logan along with her. Logan sat and fanned Miss Cynthia, providing her with relief from the stifling southern heat. Though she was only "eleven or twelve" at the time, Logan watched as her mother bathed, dressed, fed, and tended Miss Cynthia. Miss Cynthia was not the only elderly

¹⁴⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, 128.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

woman that Logan's mother cared for. By her accounts, there were several elderly white people who her mother acted as caregiver to.

Several people like that. And she would tell me that she wanted me to fan em or she would tell me "I want you to hold em" when she turn em. She said hold her shoulders – lil girl – while I turn the body for her. She was just that sick. Hardly no hospitals or nothin then... So I would watch Mother and my heart went out to he'p somebody right then and there. A lil girl, I could go to bed and go to sleep seein myself fannin Miss Cynthia or seein myself fannin Miss Rose Harris.¹⁵⁰

Logan emphasized how she was eager to help not only because of the rare chance to have time with her mother away from her siblings, or to see people and places beyond the farm, but because she liked to help. She considered it a privilege, she said. Helping people was a value that she and her mother shared; she understood it as both an element of their womanhood and a part of their religion. Despite Miss Cynthia's race, her "heart went out."

Though it is unclear whether Logan's mother was compensated financially for her caregiving, the help that Logan and her mother provided was an outreach of faith. Logan, in this same section of *Motherwit*, states that God guided her mind each day that her mother taught her. "Use whatcha got. Use whatcha got,"¹⁵¹ she states, insinuating that God granted to both her and her mother the knowledge they needed to be efficient caregivers. This early education from her mother, not only on caregiving, but on following her healing instincts and using what they both considered God-given intellect, could presumably have been the earliest base for what Logan later referred to as her "God-given motherwit."

The most outstanding lesson that Logan learned in those hot rooms, fanning and bathing and helping her mother tend to elderly people like white Miss Cynthia and Miss Rose, was not

¹⁵⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 70.

¹⁵¹ Ibid

how to position an elderly body or wipe a delicate, wrinkled brow. It was, in her mind, how to rely on God to guide your every action.

... And I used it to the best of my knowledge and God give me or my mother would he’p me get through with that. If I hadn’t had guidance from God I woulda just gotten preserve a myself. I ask God to guide me and Mother asked God to guide me too and direct me in the right path and the right way to go beyond myself to get along with ever’body. “Now Onnie,” she said. “Love ever’body.” Love, share, and care, and that’s what I do right now and I done that from a lil girl all my life.”¹⁵²

Logan’s mother’s decree to “love ever’body,” clearly rang true Logan’s entire life, and it is a message to Clark and through her to her reader. Love irrespective of race - the love of God, the love of family, the love of every mother she coached through birth and every baby whose first experience outside the womb was landing in Logan’s outstretched hands – indeed guided her through her life. It did not make her less critical of the violence and hypocrisy of white people; it made her choose another way of being.

¹⁵² Logan, *Motherwit*, 71.

Chapter 4: What Logan Left Behind: A Look at Midwifery in Modern Day Mobile County

*Onnie Lee Logan, the Alabama midwife who used what she called her God-given motherwit to deliver hundreds of babies before her 1989 autobiography made her a favorite in feminist circles, died on Tuesday at the Mobile Infirmary in Mobile, Ala. By her own reckoning she was about 85.*¹⁵³

As noted before, it is significant that the little girl from Sweet Water, in rural Marengo county, who grew up on a working farm, in an isolated part of Alabama, had her life summed up in the *New York Times*, and was dubbed a favorite of feminist circles. While the word feminist never once appeared in *Motherwit*, it nevertheless became a book passed around in both feminist and natural birth circles. In the 1970s, these two demographics became a Venn diagram of sorts, with Second Wave feminists becoming aware of the ways that women had historically practiced - and been persecuted for practicing - medicine related to birth and reproduction. Be they abortionists, herbalists, nurses, or midwives, “medicine is [was] part of our heritage as women, our history, our birthright,” wrote Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in their 1975 study *Witches, Midwives, Nurses: A History of Women Healers*.¹⁵⁴

Today, natural birth is mainstream, and homebirths are becoming increasingly mainstream as well. States like Alabama are revoking their anti-midwife laws; social media is overflowing with natural birth photos, blogs, and art; terms like “doula” and “hypnobirth”¹⁵⁵ are becoming common vernacular. While many people cite the natural birth movement as an example of their resistance to over-medicalization of birth, and a pushback against patriarchal

¹⁵³ Robert Mcg. Thomas Jr., “Onnie Lee Logan, 85, Midwife Whose 'Motherwit' Drew Praise.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, July 13, 1995. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/13/obituaries/onnice-lee-logan-85-midwife-whose-motherwit-drew-praise.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: a History of Women Healers* (Place of publication not identified: Last Work Press, 2016), 25.

¹⁵⁵ Hypnobirthing is a birth method that focuses on visualization, breathing, and meditative practices to deal with pain instead of drugs. It has grown in popularity in the past decade. <https://us.hypnobirthing.com/about/what-is-hypnobirthing-definition/>

medicine controlling women's bodies,¹⁵⁶ it must be acknowledged that the demographics of those seeking homebirths has switched almost completely since the beginning of Logan's midwifery career. Today mostly upper-middle- and upper-class white women access homebirths using midwives (along with doulas, placenta prints, belly henna and casts, and other new-age and natural trends that accompany the natural birth movement). In contrast, poor, working class, and minority women are often excluded from the dialogue of natural birth.¹⁵⁷

The natural birth circle, which makes up the other side of the Venn diagram mentioned above, was populated not only with the occasional feminist looking to have a down to earth birth, but also fundamentalist and evangelical Christians hoping to have births with midwives and without medication. Logan writes in *Motherwit* that most of the white families that she served were of this circle: fundamentalist or evangelical Christians who wanted a birth experience without pain medication.

Most white families who engage me nowadays are religious and don't believe in goin to the hospital. They really goes by the Scripture of the Bible. They want natural childbirth. They said that's the way God intended for em to have it. That's the way He intend for it to be. The Bible says when they wanted somebody to deliver Moses, they said go get a midwife...¹⁵⁸

Logan's writing exemplifies the demographic shift she experienced towards the end of her midwifery career, where more and more of her clients were fundamentalist or evangelical Christians. She explains how her "white girls" wanted to have natural births in order to both fulfill religious desires, but the desire to avoid unnecessary interventions as well. It was this

¹⁵⁶ Barbara Katz Rothman, *A Bun in the Oven: How the Food and Birth Movements Resist Industrialization*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 138.

¹⁵⁷ Skyla R. Seamans, *The Privilege of Modern Midwifery: The Absence of Low-income Women and Women of Color in the Home Birth Movement and Why It Matters*, (Southern Connecticut State University, 2015), 58.

¹⁵⁸ Logan, *Motherwit*, 134.

demographic that increased in Alabama; other midwives, practicing illegally since 1976, actively filled this need.

A google search for “biblical childbirth” turns up approximately 1,780,000 results. Books with titles like *The Christian Childbirth Handbook*, *Supernatural Childbirth*, and *Holy Labor: How Childbirth Shapes a Woman’s Soul* abound. Birth for this demographic is not just a physical ordeal – it is a spiritual one as well. The Christian view of birth, specifically the Evangelical or Fundamentalist view of childbirth, began in the the Garden of Eden.

In the book of Genesis, God creates the world and everything in it, the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve, the first humans to exist according to the texts of Abrahamic religions. After Adam and Eve sinned, eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God cursed both of them. While Adam was cursed to work the ground, growing food and providing for himself and his family, Eve’s curse is as follows:

To the woman He said:
“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;
In pain you shall bring forth children;
Your desire shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you.”¹⁵⁹

This curse, put upon Eve and all her descendants, is the basis for the view of birth that many Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians embrace. Fundamentalist writer Gloria Furman, in her text *Labor with Hope*, describes the mindset that some Christian mothers have when dealing with birth pains.

All over the world mothers undergo birth pain, but for those who believe in Jesus, even if their birth pain leads to death, they will be resurrected to eternal life. Others have argued that our text in Isaiah 66 is a “name it and claim it” promise that your upcoming childbirth will be painless if you have faith. That is a gross misinterpretation of the text, as you can see from the biblical theology of birth

¹⁵⁹ Gn. 3:16

pain. We do not expect painless childbearing, but we do expect grace upon grace in our painful childbearing.¹⁶⁰

This quote succinctly describes the beliefs that many Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian expectant mothers have in mind when choosing how they prefer to give birth.

All Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian women do not choose home birth. Many women who are a part of these religious groups choose to give birth to their children in a hospital setting. However, Evangelical and Fundamentalist women who choose home birth overwhelmingly cite religious reasons as one of, if not the main driving force behind their decision. Whether their theology instructs them to embrace the pain given to Eve and all her daughters as the rightful consequence for divine rebellion, or if they would rather focus on the belief that God created their bodies perfectly to give birth, faith is the cornerstone of their choices. In historian Pamela E. Klassen's book *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America*, she succinctly summarizes the deeper context of birth, whether inside or outside of a hospital setting. "For most of human history," she writes, "to give birth has been to approach death."¹⁶¹ For Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian mothers, birth, death, and every event in between is in the hands of God. These were the women Logan helped in the later years of her practice as a midwife, and these are the women who make up a significant portion of the home birth and midwifery movements today.

The midwifery movement of today, however, looks quite different from the profession that Onnie Lee Logan considered her divine calling. When Logan passed away in 1995, midwifery had been criminalized in Alabama for two decades. As noted in the introduction, the

¹⁶⁰ Gloria Furman, *Labor with Hope: Gospel Meditations on Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Motherhood*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 72.

¹⁶¹ Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Gender in the Practice of Home Birth*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 39.

criminalization of midwifery in Alabama wasn't a clear-cut event; in 1976, Alabama prohibited the licensing of any new midwives, but allowed midwives with existing licenses to continue practicing. Logan was the last practicing licensed granny midwife in Mobile County in 1983¹⁶² when her license was revoked.¹⁶³

Logan did not live to see the resurrection of midwifery in Alabama. In the two decades after Logan's death, the shape of midwifery in Alabama, and in the United States as a whole, has shifted dramatically. In so many ways, the Alabama that Logan left behind looks quite different from the Alabama she was born into. The landscape of midwifery is one of these differences. Logan saw the rise and fall of state licensed midwives in Alabama during her lifetime. She lived through both the beginning of the state trained and licensed cohorts of the 1910s and beyond, to the criminalization of those same midwives who were trained by the state in 1976. Now, midwifery is once again legal in the state of Alabama.¹⁶⁴ The Alabama Birth Coalition, a grassroots lobbyist organization attempted for years to push through a bill intended to legalize midwifery in Alabama.

In 2017 a change to the Alabama State Code, 34-19-12. State Board of Midwifery – Creation, or HB315, was finally passed. As of the writing of this thesis, a branch of the Alabama Birth Coalition has evolved into ALMA – the Alabama Midwives Alliance, a group that represents professional homebirth midwives in Alabama.¹⁶⁵ In January 2019, the new state

¹⁶² Logan, *Motherwit*, 180-181.

¹⁶³ While Alabama ceased distributing and renewing midwifery licenses in 1976, midwives like Logan could work until the licenses they had at that time expired.

¹⁶⁴ During Logan's career as a midwife, she and other members of her profession were trained and licensed by the state of Alabama. Now, midwives train at hospitals and midwifery colleges across the country before being issued Alabama state midwifery licenses. This process requires the applicant be at least 21 years old, a citizen of or lawfully present in the United States, and have obtained a Certified Professional Midwife (CPM) credential through an education program or pathway accredited by the Midwifery Education Accreditation Council (MEAC) or by another accrediting agency recognized by the United States Department of Education. http://alsbm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ASBM-Application-Requirements-3_5_20.pdf

¹⁶⁵ "Regulation." Alabama Midwives Alliance. Accessed April 30, 2020. <http://www.alabamamidwivesalliance.org/regulation.html>.

midwifery board issued the first homebirth license since 1976. And in early 2020, it was reported that nine new licensed midwives had delivered 98 babies in 26 different Alabama counties.¹⁶⁶ While Alabama once again has midwives practicing legally within the state boundary, never again will midwifery be a profession that Logan would recognize.

References in legal documents to exactly why the criminalization process took place in Alabama are few and far between. Most research, however, points to the main reason being the establishment of Medicaid in 1970, which expanded hospital access to women who before did not have the money to pay outright, or health insurance to help cover expenses. After this point, public health departments stopped issuing new midwifery licenses, and then refused to renew existing ones. By 1992, midwifery was “illegal by precedent.”¹⁶⁷ One question that this thesis examines is what precisely the process of criminalization consisted of, and how midwifery was made illegal. Some sources point to midwifery being criminalized outright. Others posit that licenses simply stopped being issued or renewed and eventually any practicing midwife was doing so without a license, and therefore outside of the bounds of law. It is not clear that anyone was prosecuted. Even records kept by the state of Alabama seem to be unhelpful.

The most straightforward place to go for answers to this question is the Alabama State Code itself. 2006 Alabama Code - Section 34-19-3 reads:

It shall be unlawful for any person other than a licensed professional nurse who has received a license from the State Board of Nursing and the Board of Medical Examiners to practice nurse midwifery in this state. Any person violating this subsection shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

¹⁶⁶ Anna Claire Vollers, “*Homebirth Midwives Delivered Nearly 100 Babies in 2019.*” al, January 18, 2020. <https://www.al.com/news/2020/01/now-legal-in-alabama-homebirth-midwives-delivered-nearly-100-babies-in-2019.html>.

¹⁶⁷ “Barred from Home Births, Ala. Midwives Hope to Decriminalize Their Career,” Al Jazeera America, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/11/9/alabama-midwivesbannedfromathomedeliveries.html>)

Nothing in subsection (a) of this section shall be construed as to prevent lay midwives holding valid health department permits from engaging in the practice of lay midwifery as heretofore provided until such time as said permit may be revoked by the county board of health.¹⁶⁸

While the above seems fairly straightforward, when one examines both statutes, it becomes clear that the state of Alabama created, essentially, a “catch-22” for any state licensed or lay midwife.¹⁶⁹ As referenced in statute A, nurse midwives were and are allowed to practice in Alabama. However, most nurse midwives do not perform home births, as they work under the supervision of obstetric and gynecological physicians. Only certified practicing midwives (CPMs) can facilitate home births in Alabama. As stated in the Certified Nurse Midwife Standard Protocol document for the state of Alabama:

The certified nurse midwife (CNM) may work in any setting consistent with the collaborating physician’s area of practice and function with the CNM’s population-focused scope of practice. The CNM’s scope of practice shall be defined as those functions and procedures for which the CNM is qualified by formal education, clinical training, area of certification, and experience to perform.¹⁷⁰

This legislation was the death knell for state licensed midwives in the state of Alabama.

Alabama post criminalization forced midwives like Logan to exist on the margins of legality, practicing in grey areas of the law or slipping beneath it entirely. While Alabama law prohibited midwives from assisting in births outside of a hospital setting, it does not technically prohibit unattended or partner assisted births. These births, sometimes referred to as “freebirths,” grew in popularity. Many women who were provoked either by the lack of midwifery care or a

¹⁶⁸ “2006 Alabama Code - Section 34-19-3 - License for Practice of Nurse Midwifery Required; Continuation of Practice of Lay Midwifery.,” Justia Law, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://law.justia.com/codes/alabama/2006/24046/34-19-3.html>

¹⁶⁹ Lay midwives are midwives who were not licensed by a state, and additionally were not trained in the way nurse-midwives were. <https://mana.org/about-midwives/types-of-midwife>

¹⁷⁰ “2006 Alabama Code - Section 34-19-3 - License for Practice of Nurse Midwifery Required; Continuation of Practice of Lay Midwifery.,” Justia Law, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://law.justia.com/codes/alabama/2006/24046/34-19-3.html>) <https://www.abn.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Certified-Nurse-Midwife-Standard-Protocol.pdf>

lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with available obstetric care are now attempting to re-establish birth as a natural, private event. In 2007, 33% of home births were not attended by a physician or midwife. Some of these births were unplanned, emergency events where a woman could not make it to the hospital in time to deliver or delivered before a midwife was able to reach her. The rest, up to two-thirds, were planned unattended births. Statistics on safety of unattended home births are not easily accessible.¹⁷¹

Logan wrote of this phenomenon in her autobiography. After stating how she did not “want no man stoppin these hands from doin what says the Lord,” she goes on to describe how the law could not stop a father from delivering his own baby. Then, she states the following:

I’m not gonna sit back and not do it. I don’t care who know, I go down to he’p em. They cain’t stop me from goin there. I don’t be goin there on no license. I be goin there as a friend to he’p that husband deliver his baby. That’s a way I can legally get around. I’m gonna do that as long as I can. The Lord Himself got to come and tell me not to. Cause I don’t go there to take in charge like I was when I was licensed. I sit there and look at that father and tell him what to do and what not to do. I can still get around it.¹⁷²

Given her faith, Logan chose to defy Alabama law, a law that would keep her from helping. This resistance was another form of activism that she implicitly recommended to her reader. Alabama post criminalization saw many instances like Logan describes here.

It is certainly not possible to know the motivations of every woman who had a planned unattended home birth (or birthed illegally with a midwife from another state or a retired midwife like Logan). However, one sentence in the quote above from Logan provides insight into the driving forces behind not only Logan’s continuation in her practice, but the women who sought her out. “The Lord Himself got to come and tell me not to,” she says. This sentence

¹⁷¹ Lauren Vogel, “*Do It Yourself Births Prompt Alarm*,” CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association journal = journal de l’Association medicale canadienne (Canadian Medical Association, April 5, 2011), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3071383/>

¹⁷² Logan, *Motherwit*, 181.

perfectly describes the attitude and beliefs of Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians, who consider God to be the final authority on their lives. God, not the federal and state government, local authorities, social bounds, and even themselves, dictates their beliefs and actions. Even though laws might forbid home births, if someone believes that God himself has commanded them to birth in a certain way, they are morally bound to do so.

The late 80s witnessed the beginnings of a shift from common medicalized births back to natural birth. As for legal status, like today, some states had legalized home birth midwifery and others had criminalized the practice.¹⁷³ Some midwives who practiced at the same time as Mrs. Logan began touting natural births as a way to feel closer to your baby, avoid interventions, and bond with your partner.¹⁷⁴ While natural birth gained mainstream popularity in the late 80s and early 90s, this mindset arose with the “flower child” hippie movement, and to this day is largely represented by Ina May Gaskin, a graduate student at the time, who, through a series of eclectic events, became a very influential midwife. While Gaskin is not the focus of this thesis, in order to fully understand the context for midwifery in the United States that she helped create, she represents an important direction taken in midwifery in the years after criminalization.

Born in Iowa to a Protestant family, Gaskin did not begin her educational journey in any field related to medicine. After receiving her Bachelors and Masters degrees in English Literature, Gaskin (then Ina May Middleton) fell in love with young Stephen Gaskin. Stephen, a counterculture icon and fixture of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district, was a long-haired bespectacled hippie with a penchant for mind-altering drugs and spirituality.¹⁷⁵ The first births

¹⁷³ "The History of Midwifery and Childbirth in America: A Time Line." Midwifery Today. April 10, 2018. Accessed September 01, 2018. <https://midwiferytoday.com/web-article/history-midwifery-childbirth-america-time-line/>.

¹⁷⁴ Ina May Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery*, (Strawberry Hills, NSW: ReadHowYouWant, 2014), 234

¹⁷⁵ Stephen Gaskin was an American counterculture icon, well known for his presence in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. He founded, alongside Ina May, a commune/intentional community called “The

that Gaskin attended happened while on the road with 200 other like-minded individuals. These births, which took place in the modified school buses that the group traveled in, were Gaskin's introduction to the world of birth from the perspective of a midwife. Gaskin also received a horrifying personal introduction to birth through her own first delivery when the attending physician used forceps against her will. She found this experience so torturous that she became determined to find a "saner way to give birth."¹⁷⁶ Later, the community settled in southeastern Tennessee, which was the beginning of what came to be known as "The Farm," where Gaskin began her journey to find change birth practices.

Founded in 1971, the goal of the farm was to foster intentional community.¹⁷⁷ The Farm quickly became known as a place to deliver your baby with Ina May Gaskin in addition to growing soybeans and hosting jam band sessions. When Gaskin discusses birth, it is impossible to ignore her very counter-culture roots. Her own births sound more like a drug trip or a religious vision than a description of childbirth. "I began to rush and everything got psychedelic,"¹⁷⁸ she said. The pages of her 1975 text *Spiritual Midwifery* contain plenty of pictures of beautiful long-haired women and their equally long-haired male partners. Birth, in these pictures, is communicated as a euphoric, orgasmic, and spiritual experience.

One might assume that Gaskin is merely a counter-culture icon with a fondness for birth. However, she has become an influential part of the modern natural and home birth movement.

Farm" in Tennessee, which still operates today and is used by Ina May as a birth commune. Stephen was also a 2000 Green Party presidential primary candidate, and ran on a platform of campaign finance reform, universal healthcare, and the decriminalization of marijuana. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/03/us/stephen-gaskin-hippie-who-founded-an-enduring-commune-dies-at-79.html>

¹⁷⁶ "Gaskin, Ina May." National Women's Hall of Fame. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/ina-may-gaskin/>.

¹⁷⁷ "Basic Beliefs & Agreements." The Farm. The Farm Summertown, Tennessee. Accessed April 29, 2020. <http://www.thefarm.org/about-our-community/basic-beliefs-agreements/>.

¹⁷⁸ Samantha M. Shapiro, "Mommy Wars: The Prequel" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, May 23, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/27/magazine/ina-may-gaskin-and-the-battle-for-at-home-births.html>.

Indeed, inside birth circles, her name is whispered with hushed reverence. Dog-eared copies of *Spiritual Midwifery* and *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth* are treated as gospel and doulas and midwives alike line up to hear her speak and get her autograph at events.¹⁷⁹ Gaskin has also made medical history with her midwifery career. She is credited with popularizing direct-entry¹⁸⁰ midwifery in the United States, and helped bring light to what is now known throughout the medical field as the Gaskin Maneuver,¹⁸¹ a technique that helps relieve shoulder dystocia (a certain type of fetal presentation that causes obstructed labor and can lead to death of the infant and risks severe maternal injury). Inarguably, Gaskin and her community decisively changed the shape of birth in the United States.

Part of what arose in this intentional community was a system of birth that led to Gaskin becoming a model of what modern midwifery eventually came to resemble, which was unlike anything that existed in the United States prior to this time. During the era when Mrs. Logan was first starting out, midwifery was seen consistently throughout the US as a practice utilized out of need. While natural births happened purely out of necessity, the concept of choosing a natural birth, mindfully avoiding pain control interventions, and involving one's partner to ensure a loving atmosphere was not in the public consciousness. That, however, soon changed.

In the 1970s when Gaskin was facilitating natural births in cabins at her commune, and in the 1980s when Mrs. Logan was writing her memoir, as noted above the natural birth movement was on the rise. Many people began to choose midwifery out of personal belief and motivation instead of need, economic or spiritual. One woman who chose home birth despite Alabama's

¹⁷⁹ I should know – I was one of them!

¹⁸⁰ Direct-entry is the same as lay midwifery – becoming a midwife without formal nursing training first.

¹⁸¹ While the maneuver now bears her name, Gaskin notes that she learned it from a woman in Belize, who had learned while practicing in Guatemala. The move involves moving a laboring woman to her hands and knees (explaining its alternate name, “all fours”), which changes the shape of the pelvis and allows the trapped fetal shoulder to be released. Kathryn Demott, (Nov. 1, 1999). [Gaskin Maneuver is Gaining Popularity](#)*OB/GYN News*.

laws was kind enough to allow me to interview her for this thesis. The woman, who will remain anonymous in this work, is a 57-year-old woman from a small town near Mobile, Alabama. Her first birth was a hospital delivery in 1988, with another hospital birth following in 1990. In 1992, however, she chose to have a home birth with a midwife from Mississippi attending illegally. Another homebirth followed in 1994, and then a final one in 2004. The same midwife attended each home birth, and the woman was kind enough to provide her detailed birth story¹⁸² from her final birth in addition to her interview.

In her birth story, she described a peaceful series of events, which began with a home visit from the Mississippi midwife who found her “2 centimeters dilated and 25% effaced.” She defined this visit joyfully as the “beginning of the end of this pregnancy!” From there, she discussed how after the visit from the midwife, she went about her day as normal, which included a trip to a restaurant for dinner and teaching a spin class that evening.¹⁸³ The next day she began more intense labor, but still went about her normal routine, and spent time with her older children, visited with her in-laws at lunch, and watched her mother and community at large come together to provide food for her family. The midwife then arrived, following loved ones providing roast, a tray of chicken strips for the children, and apples and peanut butter for the laboring woman.

This woman is, to this day, very family oriented, which is one factor that influenced her decision to give birth at home. Her children were present for portions of her labor, and her oldest daughter was in the room for the delivery. The rest of her birth story described the transition

¹⁸² Although recording the circumstances of a birth have been practiced throughout history and in many different forms, women recording their birth stories for either private use or publication have become more common with the rise of social media and personal blogging.

¹⁸³ Yes, **teaching** a spin class while in labor. It demands to be noted that this woman was, and is, one of the most physically fit and healthy individuals I have ever encountered.

period of labor, the gradual increase in her contractions, and the eventual birth of her youngest daughter, surrounded by her husband, her children, her close friend, and her midwife. Pictures she included with her birth story illustrate what was a calm and joyous occasion, and a part of her final sentence sums the experience up well. "... no big deal, very little bleeding overall [midwife] was thrilled and I felt strong."¹⁸⁴ This birth story is a near perfect example of how many women expect their modern homebirth to progress.

The birth story above is a wonderful example of how modern homebirths can appear. Women are drawn to homebirth because of the above reasons: they want to feel strong and calm, want their families, friends, and children involved in the birth, and want to be in the comfort of their own homes when delivering. Even though having a homebirth was illegal, this woman's birth was safe and attended by trained professionals. In contrast with positive stories and statistics, many individuals and organizations hold to the belief that home birth is dangerous and unnecessary. There are certainly home births that end in negative outcomes, whether that includes injuries, or death to the infant or mother. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, in their April 2017 Committee Opinion piece on planned home birth, do state that home birth is associated with a twofold increased risk (from 1-in-1000 to 2-in-2000) of perinatal death and a threefold increased risk (from 0.4-in-1000 to 0.6 in 1000) of neonatal seizures or serious neurologic dysfunction.

The Committee on Obstetric Practice also "considers fetal malpresentation, multiple gestation, or prior cesarean delivery to be an absolute contraindication to planned home birth."¹⁸⁵ In the same article, the Committee writes that "high-quality evidence that can inform this debate

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous, self-provided and recorded birth story, Daphne, Alabama, October 22, 2004

¹⁸⁵ "Planned Home Birth." ACOG. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2017/04/planned-home-birth>.

is limited,” before pointing out that there is not adequate randomized clinical trials of planned home birth.¹⁸⁶ There are certainly risks to planned home births, which must be taken into consideration not only when planning a home birth, but when discussing home birth as well. The Committee on Obstetric Practice also analyzed reasons why women might plan a home birth. The reasons they mention first include avoiding medical interventions and avoiding the atmosphere of a hospital. In the below quote, the Committee presented their findings regarding the safety of home births.

Recent studies have found that when compared with planned hospital births, planned home births are associated with fewer maternal interventions, including labor induction or augmentation, regional analgesia, electronic fetal heart rate monitoring, episiotomy, operative vaginal delivery, and cesarean delivery. Planned home births also are associated with fewer vaginal, perineal, and third-degree or fourth-degree lacerations and less maternal infectious morbidity.¹⁸⁷

Despite the above, the Committee ultimately concluded both positives and negatives to planned home birth. This is a realistic view; while evidence shows that home birth is largely safe, there are risks that midwives today help mothers evaluate before making their choice.

Planned home births are a small part of the birth landscape in the United States today. While childbirth has not changed in a physiological sense, the way that we cope with birth and birth difficulties (i.e. – cesarean sections, vacuum and forceps assisted births, and episiotomies) has evolved throughout human history. Some of the things that have changed include women’s

¹⁸⁶ Olsen O, Clausen JA. Planned hospital birth versus planned home birth. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2012, Issue 9. Art. No.: CD000352. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD000352.pub2.

¹⁸⁷ Cheng YW, Snowden JM, King TL, Caughey AB. Selected perinatal outcomes associated with planned home births in the United States. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2013;209:325.e1–8.; Brocklehurst P, Hardy P, Hollowell J, Linsell L, Macfarlane A, McCourt C, et al. Perinatal and maternal outcomes by planned place of birth for healthy women with low risk pregnancies: the Birthplace in England national prospective cohort study. *Birthplace in England Collaborative Group. BMJ* 2011;343:d7400.; Wax JR, Lucas FL, Lamont M, Pinette MG, Cartin A, Blackstone J. Maternal and newborn outcomes in planned home birth vs planned hospital births: a metaanalysis. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2010;203:243.e1–8.; Snowden JM, Tilden EL, Snyder J, Quigley B, Caughey AB, Cheng YW. Planned out-of-hospital birth and birth outcomes. *N Engl J Med* 2015;373:2642–53.

expectations of childbirth, ways to manage pain, healthcare systems, the economic considerations in obtaining birth care, and technology involved with pregnancy and birth.¹⁸⁸ Technology, along with increased hygiene and nutrition have undoubtedly increased survival rates for both mothers and infants. However, the effect was not as long lasting as one expected.

In the year that Logan was born, the puerperal¹⁸⁹ death rate for women was 15.7 in 100,000.¹⁹⁰ In the United States in 1900, ten years before, the infant mortality rate was 165 in 1,000.¹⁹¹ In 1987, the maternal mortality rate had dropped to 7.2 in 100,000,¹⁹² and the infant mortality rate to 10.00 in 1000.¹⁹³ One would assume that these rates would improve with time in a country like the United States. However, as of 2018, the United States maternal mortality rate was 17.4 in 100,000, which is, unthinkable, higher than the average in 1910. The infant mortality rate, however, as continued to drop, with the rate in 2019 at 5.748 deaths in 1000.¹⁹⁴

Despite this, horrifically, the United States currently ranks the highest in maternal mortality when compared to 49 other developed countries across the world. 20%-50% of these deaths can be attributed to preventable causes, like hemorrhage, severe high blood pressure

¹⁸⁸ "How Has Childbirth Changed in This Century?" Taking Charge of Your Health & Wellbeing. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/explore-healing-practices/holistic-pregnancy-childbirth/how-has-childbirth-changed-century>.

¹⁸⁹ Merriam Webster, s.v. "Puerperal:" of, relating to, or occurring during childbirth or the period immediately following

¹⁹⁰ Robert Morse Woodbury, *The Trend of Maternal-Mortality Rates in the United States Death-Registration Area, 1900-1921*, Director of Statistical Research, Children's Bureau, Washington, D.C., <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.14.9.738>

¹⁹¹ CB, Abstract of the 1900 Census, table 97; HS series B 142; SA 1922, table 53; SA 1959, table 73; SA 1980, table 200; SA 1997, tables 213 and 1336; and SA 1999, tables 133 and 226.

¹⁹² "First Data Released on Maternal Mortality in Over a Decade." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 30, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2020/202001_MMR.htm.

¹⁹³ "Current Trends Infant Mortality -- United States, 1988." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00015153.htm>.

¹⁹⁴ 2018 Annual Report, America's Health Rankings, accessed April 18, 2020 <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2018-annual-report/findings-international-comparison>

(preeclampsia and eclampsia), and infection.¹⁹⁵ All of this spells out the undeniable fact that the United States is in the midst of a maternal and infant healthcare crisis.

One of the factors in the United States' infant and maternal mortality rates is race. Alabama is no exception to this rule. Shamefully, this indicates no improvement in 20 years for racial maternal mortality rates. Minority women, specifically black women, are disproportionately affected by the maternal healthcare crisis in Alabama, and in the United States as a whole.¹⁹⁶ This is reflected in Mobile County, where 2018 infant mortality rates were 12.1 infant deaths per 1,000 live births for black residents and 6.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births for white residents.¹⁹⁷ White residents make up 59.4% of Mobile County, while black residents make up 36.0%.

By examining the above data, it is immediately evident that black infants still have dramatically higher mortality rates than white infants. This is a trend that is reflected nationally, but rates in Alabama are alarmingly high. According to CDC data for the year 2017, only Mississippi, Arkansas, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Tennessee have worse infant mortality rates than Alabama, with Mississippi topping the chart at a startling 8.6 percent per 1,000 live births.¹⁹⁸

Since homebirths have only been legal since 2017, and the state is still in the process of putting together an Advisory Board of Midwifery, it is nearly impossible to determine the rate of homebirths today in Mobile County. However, these statistics (or lack thereof) reflect the impact

¹⁹⁵ Nan H. Troiano,; Patricia M. Witcher, "Maternal Mortality and Morbidity in the United States". *The Journal of Perinatal & Neonatal Nursing*. 2018), 222–231

¹⁹⁶ Julia Chinyere Oparah, Helen Arega, Dantia Hudson, Linda Jones, and Talita Oseguera. *Battling over Birth: Black Women and the Maternal Health Care Crisis*, (Amarillo, TX: Praeclarus Press, 2018), 171

¹⁹⁷ Infant Mortality Alabama 2018, Alabama Department of Public Health, Center for Health Statistics, December 11, 2019, Accessed April 20, 2020 http://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/healthstats/assets/im_18.pdf

¹⁹⁸ "National Center for Health Statistics." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. February 01, 2018. Accessed September 01, 2018, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/cesarean_births/cesareans.htm.

that the loss of Mrs. Logan, and midwives like her, had on Alabama as a whole. In Mobile county, it could be argued that these statistics can be at least partially attributed to the loss of midwifery in black communities. Black women in Mobile county, many of whom had mothers and grandmothers who were served by midwives like Mrs. Logan, (or perhaps even Logan herself), have lost access to personalized, community based maternal healthcare, and now rely on the hospitals with high c-section and intervention rates. Many black residents in Mobile County (and the rest of the United States) are disproportionately affected by poverty as well, which removes access to private midwives¹⁹⁹ that more financially able women can access.

Birth choice and access is a worldwide issue. In the United States, it cannot be denied that economic status, healthcare access, and community support dictate women's ability to birth in a way that is right for them and their families. For some women, the choice, or lack thereof, spells life or death. One can only hope for and work towards a future where birth choice and access is fair and equal, where maternal mortality rates are not dictated by skin color and geographic location, and where women are listened to, respected, and assisted in the birth process.

From state trained midwives, to births in buses, to modern day waterbirths with midwives and doulas in attendance, the landscape of birth has changed dramatically since the beginning of Onnie Lee Logan's career. While midwifery evolves into a form that Logan might not now find recognizable, or even, as a black woman, accessible, it is important to preserve the historic legacy that Logan and other midwives like her left behind. Logan herself knew how important it was to preserve this knowledge. In the afterword of *Motherwit*, Katherine Clark describes her

¹⁹⁹ While one would assume that by "financially able" women, I mean people with access to private insurance, but this is not so – in Alabama, as well as in some other areas of the United States, certified practicing midwives (who are not associated with a hospital or birth center) are not generally paid by insurance companies, and rather charge flat fees to women who choose to access their services.

first meeting with Logan, where Logan asked her to help share her story. After describing how, despite her not fully knowing how to read or write, Logan was determined to create a book that showcased her life and work. She was determined not to “die with it.” At age seventy-three (“more or less”), she was afraid of dying with her experiences untold. “I don’t want to go under ground and have all that covered up,” she said. “I don’t want it buried with me. I want to leave it behind in black and white.”²⁰⁰

Logan’s life work was preserved. Her story is written down in black and white and has been published and distributed across the world. And when Logan passed away in those white-washed halls of the Mobile Infirmary Hospital, her obituary was featured in the *New York Time*, alongside articles about Ina May Gaskin, and the safety and risks of homebirth, and numerous other articles preserving knowledge of birth and midwifery. Her story has been reposted on blogs and social media, taught in college courses and doula classes, passed from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, friend to friend. It was not buried with her.

When I read *Motherwit* for the first time, I admit I was not immediately struck by the story. As a high school freshman, my understanding of the complexity and depth of the stories that Logan told was limited. Through my high school career, I re-read *Motherwit* many times, but it was not until college, when I had shelved the idea of becoming a midwife in favor of studying the history of midwifery that Logan’s story caught me and did not let go. Over my academic career, Logan haunted me. When I studied the midwifery of the 15th and 16th centuries, accounts of herbal medicine brought me back to Logan’s own account of the herbs her mother gathered.²⁰¹ When I read about midwives performing abortions in the 19th and 20th centuries, I

²⁰⁰ Logan, *Motherwit*, 186.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 53.

recalled Logan's own refusal to assist in terminating pregnancies.²⁰² And finally, when I became determined to study Alabama's current maternal and infant mortality crisis, Logan's story rushed to the forefront of my mind.

While the maternal and infant mortality crisis facing Alabama and other parts of the United States is certainly a gripping subject, the core question that this thesis returns to is how and why Logan's life story is significant when viewed through the viewpoint of race, the lens of gender, or the scope of religion. In addition, I have come to understand *Motherwit* as a form of activism, an effort to help along in making the world a better, kinder, and more just place. When Logan sat with Katherine Clark and mediated on her life – much like her mother sitting on the floor with her young children – she was offering a life lesson through story. *Motherwit* is about midwifery, yes. But it is also about the rich and meaningful life of a little black girl who was Blessed, as Logan put it. A woman who made History.

²⁰² Logan, *Motherwit*, 120.

Epilogue:
“That’s nothing but my own words”

The stories that Logan weaves spring from her life experiences come to life in the pages of *Motherwit*, and their greatest value is that they are her own words. When Katherine Clark sat down with Logan after the publication of *Motherwit* in 1989, they cradled a copy between them. Poring over the pages, Logan requested that Clark read her some. “‘Read some of it to me, baby,’ she said. And I did. ‘That’s in the book?’ she asked when I finished. I nodded. ‘That’s nothing but my own words,’ she said. ‘That’s exactly what I said to you.’” Logan didn’t realize that Clark preserved her exact words. She assumed that her thoughts, feelings, and stories would be filtered through the text in a way that she could not fully have control over. Instead, her own words, her accent, her train of thought and her convictions were tattooed onto the pages of *Motherwit*.

Because she was born black, and born a woman, and born both in rural Alabama in the early 1900s, Logan was not always granted a voice in the way that others with more privilege were. Instead of accepting this, Logan fought for her right to tell her story. When Logan met Katherine Clark, a self-proclaimed “twenty-one-year-old white girl, a Harvard graduate and a native of the affluent Birmingham suburb known as Mountain Brook,” she saw her chance to put her life story down on paper. Because of this chance meeting, arranged by Clark’s cousin, who employed Logan, *Motherwit* was born. Clark wrote of the meeting: “You is the one,” she told me. “I been praying about this for fifteen years. I was gonna write this book if I had to scratch it out myself, but the Lord done fixed it so I don’t have to. I can give my story to you. You’ll know what to do with it. You is the one.”²⁰³

²⁰³ Logan, *Motherwit*, 186.

With those words, Logan entrusted her story to Clark, and together they began to preserve her words. Part of the urgency that Logan felt stemmed from the fact that three months before she met Katherine Clark, she had received a letter that marked the official end of her career as a midwife. Logan was devastated. “Nothing in my life has ever made me feel so little,” she said. “When my husband came home, he had to pick me up off the floor. Fact is, I’m still trying to get up. It set me back that far.”²⁰⁴ At that point, Logan’s husband became the caretaker to the woman who had taken care of others her entire life.

When Logan approached Clark to ask her to transcribe her words, neither of them knew how far her story would go. From the Today Show to stage plays²⁰⁵, Logan’s story was shared far beyond Mobile or Sweet Water. Despite her humble beginnings, or perhaps because of them, the little girl who God blessed with *Motherwit* truly made a sweeping impact on birth in Mobile, in Alabama, and beyond.

In studying *Motherwit*, it becomes apparent that there is a lack of scholarship that exists on Mrs. Logan and other members of her cohort. While it is momentous that Logan’s story was preserved, in her own words, scholarly analysis on her life simply does not exist in the mainstream. While historians study her life and write about her in brief paragraphs in larger tomes, to date, there does not exist a single study on Logan’s life that I have been able to unearth. Logan’s life, and the lives of others like her, demand to be remembered. This is what I hope to do by examining Logan’s life and the way she chose to reveal it, and by looking forward into the landscape that midwives who came after Logan inherited and created.

²⁰⁴ Logan, *Motherwit*, 187-188.

²⁰⁵ No online evidence exists of the stage plays that were performed, but Katherine Clark confirmed that they were performed during an oral interview in October 2019. Katherine Clark, interview by author, Pensacola, October 25, 2019

Logan opens *Motherwit* by stating: “My name is Onnie Lee Logan. I was born in Sweet Water Alabama in Marengo County.” She then dives full speed into her life story, firing off facts about herself, her family, and her community at rapid speed. Logan ends *Motherwit* with these words:

Whatever I’ve done, I’ve done as well as I could and beyond. If I had went on I believe I wouldn’t’ve been no mo successful bein a registered nurse or a doctor. I’ve had several people to tell me that you should’ve been, you should’ve been a doctor. I cain’t say I wished I had done that because I’d be neglectin the blessin that God give me if I say that. I believe God pulled out all of his blessin’s on me and I appreciate em and put em to good work. So I’m satisfied at what I’ve done. I’m satisfied at what has happened in my life. The only thing I wished I had’ve had was mo general education. But not anyway that I would’ve been a real rich doctor or a great big high nurse. Although I didn’t get that I’m satisfied. Perfectly satisfied at what my life has done for me. I was a good midwife. One of the best as they say. This book was the last thing I had planned to do until God said well done. I consider myself – in fact if I leave tomorrow – I’ve lived my life and I’ve lived it well.”²⁰⁶

The last sentence is a perfect ending to the story of the little black girl who God blessed, the woman from Sweet Water who delivered hundreds of babies, the woman who fought to preserve her story.

She lived it well.

²⁰⁶ Logan, *Motherwit*, 184.

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