Motherhood is fraught with expectations and stereotypes in the United States. Despite the positive historical association of strong nurturing abilities with black mothers, contemporary U.S. society and culture often vilifies African American women; movies, television, and music portray them as wantonly sexual. For example, national discussion about welfare policy has been highly racialized. Although more white families depend on welfare than black families, and the number of black teenagers on welfare is tiny, the stereotypical welfare mother has long been an irresponsible black teenager. Media coverage of welfare has declined and become less racialized in recent years, but it remains true that "when white Americans think about welfare, they are likely to think about black Americans." Given the widespread negative stereotypes about welfare, this tendency reinforces negative stereotypes of black women. The assumption that poverty and laziness go together endures. White culture considers middle-class or wealthy women who stay home to raise children to be heroic, yet poor mothers who exercise this option, willingly or otherwise, risk being labeled lazy or worse, especially if they happen to be black. So much rhetoric swirls around black mothers that the reality that most are devoted, loving, hardworking parents—bearing responsibilities similar to and at least as weighty as those of most white mothers—can be obscured from white view.

What is it like to be a black mother in a white society? As a white mother, I can scarcely begin to imagine what it would be like to have to teach my child to cope with daily aggressions large and small; to fight for my child’s access to educational opportunities that are simply handed to other children; to fear constantly that my child will be the victim of senseless violence, whether verbal or physical; and all...
the while to have my parenting misunderstood and denigrated by the very society made more prosperous by my efforts. The black feminist poet Audre Lorde, addressing white women, sums up this experiential gap: “Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.”

Most white women in the United States are socialized to expect that, if we so choose, we will one day be part of a nuclear family—wife, husband, and children—and that the children we raise will be biologically ours. For various sociohistorical reasons, black women have not always expected this, nor has it been obvious that being part of an exclusive nuclear family would serve them or their children best. Black women’s modes of parenting certainly include blood mothering (parenting one’s biological children), but also prevalent are relationships of othermothering and fictive kin (caring for children not one’s own), as well as the public roles of church mothers and community mothers. White people’s ignorance of these important forms of motherhood has contributed to our negative stereotyping of black mothers. Given the gulf between black and white understandings and valuations of motherhood, can any European American, even a mother, ever fully understand what motherhood has meant for African American women? I suspect we cannot, but I think we can learn something by trying.

Womanist theologian and Presbyterian lay preacher Delores S. Williams’s writings, especially her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, contain reflections on the question of the theological significance of black motherhood. In particular, Williams critiques the surrogacy expectations under which black women have suffered, and she celebrates all forms of mothering in which black women engage as enabling the race to survive. This chapter sets Williams’s ideas about black motherhood in dialogue with various thinkers to consider their implications for theological anthropology. My goal is to begin to discover the ways in which European American Christians can understand and learn from the struggles of black women to be good mothers. I attempt not to compare social rhetoric about black and white mothers, but to consider what motherhood means “on the ground.” By inquiring into what it means to be a black mother in a white society, we may become able to see something we have not seen before about the meaning of being a white mother in a white society.