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Motherhood to Motherhoods

Ideologies of the "Feminine"

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Nam Lee, Jan Osborn, Tina Powell, Katrina Millan, Ame Khin May-Kyawt, Amber Power, Manjima Tarafdar, Thea Jones, JWells, Bernadine Cortina, Anika Manuel, Sofia Ahmed, Leah Aldridge, Janice P. De-Whyte

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NAM LEE AND JAN OSBORN

Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of the "Feminine"

The eleven essays in this special issue originated from the "Motherhood to motherhoods: Ideologies of the 'Feminine'" conference held at Chapman University in Orange, California, on April 28–30, 2023. Against the background of intense discussions on women's reproductive rights in the United States (US), the conference provided a fertile ground for reexamining motherhood as a concept extending beyond essentialist and biological determinations.

Indeed, the conference's title, mirrored in this special issue, signifies a deliberate shift in perspective: from the singular and archetypal narrative of motherhood to a plural and dynamic interpretation. This shift is not only semantic but also ideologically significant, marking a move away from the traditional motherhood myth and the patriarchal institution it upholds. By reframing motherhood from a singularity to plurality—Motherhood to motherhoods—the conference acknowledged a range of caregiving practices beyond the biological mother. The subtitle, "Ideologies of the 'Feminine,'" draws from French feminist thought to challenge fixed gender categories to reconceptualize motherhood as an ethical and transformative act transcending patriarchal institutions.

This intellectual exploration of the "feminine" enriches the contemporary discourse on motherhood as a lived, contested, and dynamic phenomenon. The conference underscored motherhood as a social construct, a theme echoed and expanded upon in this issue. Consequently, motherhood is reenvisioned, transcending its biological function to become a way of being accessible to all genders. Reconceptualizing motherhood as a series of actions—that is, mothering—rather than a fixed identity allows for a more inclusive understanding of the term.

The articles in this issue, thus, collectively interrogate and deconstruct the patriarchal conception of motherhood, which has often confined women to a biological destiny bound by traditional social expectations. Instead, they propose a more inclusive and flexible interpretation. "Mothering" is understood as an act of care, concern, and love that is not exclusive to women or biological mothers. This conceptual transition from a noun to a verb—to mother or mothering—emphasizes action and agency, creating a space for anyone providing nurturing and care to be mothering (O'Reilly 377).

The act of mothering can be seen as an expression of the feminine that is both inclusive and radically other-oriented, embodying the ethical attitude towards the other that French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, espouse. In their conceptualization, the feminine is not only an identity or role but a radical, ethical, and transformative force that can dismantle the masculine order of hierarchical binaries of the patriarchal structures. Both the conference and this issue engage with these French feminist ideas; they challenge the status quo and explore how motherhood and the feminine can subvert and reconstruct the patriarchal narratives that have traditionally constrained them.

Characterized by their interdisciplinary scope, these articles draw from motherhood studies across the arts, literature, film studies, and social sciences to construct a nuanced critique of the motherhood myth. This myth is interrogated not only for its role in perpetuating gender norms but also for its influence on media representations and ideological apparatuses shaping social perceptions of motherhood. The goal is to question and dismantle the image of the patriarchal mother and to address the intersections of body, labour, health, and gender identity within the concept of mothering.

This issue considers how culture, race, and national context influence personal and collective experiences of motherhood. It aims to provide a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives, especially those of people of colour, thus avoiding a binary or singular perspective on motherhood. Instead, this issue presents a global view, recognizing the varied realities of motherhood and how it is being redefined in academia and society.

Through the multidisciplinary lens of "Motherhood to motherhoods," this issue encapsulates an ongoing dialogue seeking to redefine the contours of the feminine while offering fresh perspectives on mothering as a site of action and profound social change. It showcases how the concept of motherhood has evolved and continues to evolve, especially in light of global challenges and debates.

Motherhood and the Feminine

The June 2022 US Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe v. Wade highlighted the need to reconceptualize mothering from the individual to the collective in the US and globally. In their 2018 novel *Motherhood,* Sheila Heti's narrator portends these contentious times:

> A woman must have children because she must be occupied. When I think of all the people who want to forbid abortions, it seems it can only mean one thing—not that they want this new person in the world, but that they want women to be doing the work of childrearing more than they want her to be doing anything else. There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. (32)

This yoking of womanhood with motherhood is, of course, familiar. Adrienne Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution* disentangled women from the institution of motherhood, and the scholarly exploration of motherhood beyond patriarchy and gender essentialism began in earnest. "Motherhood," Rich proposes, "—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism" (15). This ideology, which affects women of every class and colour, is "essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers" (15). Rich deconstructs the duality of the patriarchal mythology of the female body; this body is represented as impure, corrupting, and dangerous to masculinity until women become mothers—now their bodies are sacred and asexual, fulfilling their destiny. Rich challenges us to counter the repression of women's bodies as "territory and machine" and to imagine a world where "women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe" (298).

French feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément provide imaginings of liberation, calling out the patriarchal "hierarchization" that has led to the need to imagine a new world: "Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man. Male privilege [is] shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*.… Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity … woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy" (64). Cixous sees hope in upsetting the hierarchy, knowing that there must "be ways of relating that are completely different from the tradition ordained by the masculine economy," ways of relating that are not "threatened by the existence of an otherness" (74). In calling for radical transformation, Cixous acknowledges the "ideological theater" that entraps us, calling for liberation that includes "an abundance of

the other" (84). The new feminine cannot be contained by a masculine hierarchy or a motherhood myth; it is, rather, a woman "com[ing] out of herself to go the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be" (86).

The Body and the Intersectionality of Mothering

Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) examines reproductive rights and argues that "some of the most resilient inequalities in our legal and social treatment of women lie in the domain of reproductive control" (71). Bordo challenges readers to consider yet another deeply embedded cultural duality—that of the legal "embodied subject" or that of "mere bodies," in which the women are constructed as "fetal incubators," and the fetus is constructed as an "embodied subject." Bordo argues that the body "is not only a *text* of culture" but also "a *practical,* direct locus of social control" (165).

Bordo shows how racism, classism, and sexism intersect when considering the history of reproductive justice. In thinking through this argument, Bordo returns to women's "experience" and the danger of "essentializing the experiences of some groups of women while effacing the histories and experiences of others" (94). As we challenge the singular and archetypal concept of Motherhood and transition to mothering—a concept that moves beyond essentialist and biological determinations—it is imperative to consider intersectional radical feminist theory as a way to "find each other and beyond that, find each other *in* each other" (Ross xiii), which is reminiscent of Cixous's call for liberation that includes "an abundance of the other" (84). Reproductive justice theory, developed through the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, conceptualizes reproductive justice as a human right, bringing attention to important concepts running through French feminism and motherhood studies. The collective defines reproductive justice as "1) the human right to not have a child, 2) the human right to have a child, and 3) the human right to parent in safe and healthy environments" (Ross xvi).

As motherhood studies has expanded, mothering has become linked to caregiving, to those engaged in "the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life" (Gumbs, "Introduction" 9). Angela Garbes writes about her experience coming to understand her mother, a Pinay woman who immigrated to the US and worked as a hospice nurse: "The terrain of mothering is not limited to the people who give birth to children; it is not defined by gender" (9). Mothering is not an individual or private activity; it is a "social responsibility," requiring "robust community support" (Garbes 10). This delinking of mothering from biology has a substantive impact, as motherhood

studies challenges the patriarchal institution of motherhood: "Mothering is a primary front in this struggle, not as a biological function, but as a *social practice*" (Oka 51). Oka argues that the home is "*the front of human sustenance* that is constitutive of hetero-patriarchal, white supremacist capitalism *and* its limits" (53-54). Oka calls for ten steps of mothering that will dismantle the motherhood myth and transform society. These include a "fight for reproductive integrity and self-determination of all indigenous women, women of color, queer, trans, disabled, and poor women," as well as reclaiming "communal responsibility for caregiving, including childrearing" (54). Andrea O'Reilly, too, forwards this position, using the term "maternal empowerment" as a theoretical stance, "an oppositional stance that seeks to counter and correct the many ways that patriarchal motherhood causes mothering to be limiting and oppressive to women" (369). As we reexamine motherhood as a concept beyond essentialist and biological determinations and as we embrace the "feminine" as a radical, ethical, and transformative force that can dismantle the masculine order of hierarchical binaries in patriarchal structures, we can see the "practice of mothering as an alternative building practice of valuing ourselves and each other" (Gumbs, "M/other Ourselves" 31). If we can reimagine our approach to mothering, we can bring life to a transformed society.

From Motherhood to motherhoods: Major Themes and Approaches in This Issue

The articles in this issue challenge the essentialization of mothers and the institution of motherhood. They reconceptualize motherhood, examine the radical feminine, body and sexuality, and explore motherhood at the intersection of race and religion.

The collection's first four articles encourage us to rethink the notion of motherhood through intersectional nexuses, including economics, race, and politics. In "A Case for Motherhood as an Intersectional Identity: A Feminist's Labour of Love," Tina Powell engages with the evolution of motherhood studies and feminist theories to reconceptualize motherhood as an intersectional identity. Powell argues that neither feminists nor economists adequately address mothers. Katrina Millan's "Only Mom Can Save the World: Myths of Salvation and Destruction in Post-Apocalyptic Film" calls for a reconceptualization of motherhood by analyzing two recent post-apocalyptic films: *A Quiet Place* and *Birdbox*. Despite featuring nonconventional mothers, both films still rely on mythic "mother love" as the emotional and social core of salvation, thus reaffirming white, middle-class, heteronormative motherhood. In "Motherhood and Gender Roles: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in the Greater Toronto Area," Ame Khin explores the way migrant women from Myanmar reconceptualize motherhood

and gender roles in Toronto as they juggle their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees at the intersection of two different cultures. Amber Power's "Updating *The Mother*: Contemporary Intermedial Approaches to Brecht's 1931 'Learning Play'" analyzes two contemporary experimental performance groups' intermedial productions of Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* and explores the techniques used to address contemporary social and political issues. The productions, Power argues, represent the mother as a powerful mode of resistance, helping us reconceptualize revolutionary mothers.

The next three articles epitomize the feminine as the radical body politics of subverting patriarchal, heteronormative motherhood. In "Subverting 'Divine' Bengali Motherhood in Rituparno Ghosh's Film *Titli*," Manjima Tarafdar analyzes how the film Titli challenges and subverts the traditional idea of "Goddess mother" in Bengal, India, by depicting a sexual mother. This radical subversion presents a new representation of the mother, not as a figure of sacrifice but as an individual with the sexual desires and aspirations of a woman. Thea Jones's "The Outlawed Nipple: Breastless Parents and the Desire to Conform to Normative Motherhood" presents a radical image of breastless parents, which problematizes the pervasiveness and politics of breastfeeding as a tacit component in normative mothering posing harm to nonnormative parenting bodies, including trans parents. JWells's "'I Don't Want Dirty People Holding My Kids': Analyzing White Mothers' Perpetuation of Misogynoir in *Born Behind Bars*" focuses on pregnant-incarcerated mothers in US prison nurseries. Through an analysis of the docuseries *Born Behind Bars,* JWells examines how prison nurseries position white mothers as the pinnacle of motherhood while pathologizing Black motherhood, replicating the systemic criminalization of Black mothers.

The next four articles in this issue explore motherhood at the intersection of race and religion. In "Mamie Till-Mobley: Paradox and Poetics of Racialized Public Motherhood in Chinonye Chukwu's *Till*," Bernadine Cortina focuses on the biographical film *Till* and its matrifocal lens as it explores racialized public motherhood and Black maternal necropolitics throughout American history. Cortina highlights the long line of Black maternal activists initiated by Mamie Till-Mobley. Anika Manuel's "(In)Visible Boxes: Racialized Intersubjectivity and Transracial Mothering in Senna's *Caucasia*" analyzes Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia* to explore the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering. Focusing on the portrayal of a mixed-race daughter and a white mother, Manuel demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters impact their intersubjectivity and complicate their mutual understanding. In "Muslim Motherhood," Sofia Ahmed argues that the intersectionality between religion, culture, and ethnicity in Muslim motherhood not only portrays oppressive and unrealistic expectations imposed on Muslim mothers but also highlights the resilient

forms of resistance that Muslim mothers employ as they negotiate to raise children in the host country. Leah Aldridge's "'Your Children Will Soon be Forgotten': *12 Years a Slave* and the 'Seeding' of African American Motherhood" focuses on the historical relationship between Black motherhood and bondage through her analysis of Steve McQueen's 2013 film *Twelve Years a Slave*. Aldridge examines the film from the perspective of the twenty-first-century Black Lives Matter Movement. Eliza's story, in Aldridge's reading, becomes the seed of all grieving Black mothers who lost their children to racialized violence.

The issue culminates with an investigation of ancient notions of motherhood, maternity, and childbirth. In "A Matter of Life or Death: Maternity in Antiquity and Beyond," Janice P. De-Whyte connects the ancient ideologies of motherhood and childbirth with contemporary issues, stressing the deep roots of our current challenges. De-Whyte advocates for urgent change because maternal morbidity and mortality are still a matter of life and death.

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TINA POWELL

A Case for Motherhood as an Intersectional Identity: A Feminist's Labour of Love

There are around 2.2 billion mothers ("Statistics"), and over 77 million live in the United States (US) (United States Census Bureau). Unfortunately, feminists have self-admittedly done a poor job representing the interests of mothers. Shari L. Thurer, for example, asserts that as soon as a woman becomes a mother, "her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant" (191). In short, she "ceases to exist" (Thurer 191). Moreover, even though women's unpaid domestic work in the US raises the gross domestic product by 25.7 per cent (McCann), economists often overlook the work of full-time mothers. This article situates mothers within feminist theory and discourse by demonstrating that mothers are not fully represented by feminists or economists and as such are marginalized by both identities. In short, motherhood is an experience that is not adequately addressed by the experiences of women or workers. An intersectional approach will help ensure mothers get the attention they deserve as a social identity in intersectional feminist scholarship.

you want to keep
the blood and the milk hidden
as if the womb and breast
never fed you
(Kaur 223)

In "The Myths of Motherhood" psychologist Shari L. Thurer alleges the following: "On delivering a child, a woman becomes a factotum, a life-support system. Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant. Once she attains motherhood, a woman must hand in her point of view" (191). In other words, as soon as a woman becomes a mother, she "ceases to exist" (Thurer 191). But mothers do exist. Eighty per cent of women will become mothers at some point in their lives

(O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism"). Moreover, there are around 2.2 billion mothers living in the world ("Statistics"), and over 77 million live in the United States (US) (United States Census Bureau).

Adrienne Rich, author of the seminal maternal theory text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution*, proposes there are two meanings of motherhood: "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (lxi). Although motherhood as a relationship with one's children and the power of reproduction is important and makes a valuable contribution to society, it is the institution of motherhood that causes the most concern to feminists. According to Rich, motherhood, the institution, "has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (lxi). As Andrea O'Reilly posits, "A feminist mother seeks the eradication of motherhood as she recognizes that it is a patriarchal institution in which gender inequality, or more specifically the oppression of women, is enforced, maintained, and perpetuated" ("Empowered" 618). Rich further argues: "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (25). Institutional motherhood embodies society's motherhood norms, as manifested in O'Reilly's ten dictates of normative motherhood: "essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization" ("Normative Motherhood" 478). The institution of motherhood subjugates, oppresses, and impoverishes women, yet mothers until recently have garnered little attention from feminists.

Brian T. Thorn, author of *From Left to Right: Maternalism and Women's Political Activism in Postwar Canada*, defines feminism "as a movement that fights for the equality of *all* groups of women" including mothers (5). It is an ideology that "must acknowledge the existence of a patriarchal system and a belief that this system disadvantages all groups of women, even if some groups—working-class and ethnic minority women in particular—face harsher consequences because of their class, racial, and/or ethnic status" (Thorn 5). In her book *Frontiers of Feminism: Movements and Influences in Québec and Italy, 1960-1980*, Jacinthe Michaud argues that unity and solidarity among women were critical in the fight for liberation during second-wave feminism: "Women-only-spaces were built on the idea that *all women* shared the same oppression and the same interests in the process of liberation. Not surprisingly, clashes over differences emerged rapidly in many feminist/women's groups and shook the foundation of the entire movement" (my emphasis, 105). Although differences, such as education, age, occupation, socioeconomic status, and political orientation were often recognized and

acknowledged by feminists/women's groups, other categories of women were (and perhaps still are) silenced—namely, new immigrants, refugees, women of colour, Indigenous women, rural and semi-rural women, and lesbians (Michaud, *Frontiers*). A noticeable absence from this list of silenced women is mothers.

Author and activist bell hooks argues that "Female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists" (89). O'Reilly rightfully asserts that motherhood "is the unfinished business of feminism" ("Matricentric Feminism" 458). She also concludes "the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women's role and identity as mothers" ("Matricentric Feminism" 458). Yet in many regards, motherhood is a "crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory" (Rich lxiii).

This article situates mothers within feminist theory and discourse by demonstrating that mothers are not fully represented by feminists or economists and as such are marginalized by both identities. By making a case for motherhood as its own social identity in intersectional feminist scholarship, mothers can receive the attention, recognition, and representation they deserve.[1]

Motherhood and Feminism

The relationship between motherhood and feminism has a long and complicated history. Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* dedicates a chapter to "parental affection" and advocates that "To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands" (156; ch. X). Simone de Beauvoir argues that "I'm not against mothers. I am against the ideology which expects every woman to have children, and I'm against the circumstances under which mothers have to have their children" (qtd. in Schwarzer 76). Betty Friedan's ground-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique* was first published in 1963. Even though there was "no definitive evidence that children are less happy, healthy, adjusted, *because* their mothers work" (Friedan 284), suburban mothers in the 1960s were subjected to an onslaught of "fake news" headlines claiming working mothers were the cause of mental health challenges, academic difficulties, and juvenile delinquency in children. Friedan asserts, "Mother love is said to be sacred in America, but with all the reverence and lip service she is paid, mom is a pretty safe target, no matter how correctly or incorrectly her failures are interpreted" (295). Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, and Friedan show that mothers suffer from a lack of independence, unfair expectations, and harsh judgment.

As mentioned previously, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, first published in 1976, brought some much-needed attention to the institution of motherhood. However, in the introduction that she penned for the 1986 edition, she admits to the white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon focus of the original text and acknowledges the significant differences among Black, Asian, Indigenous, and queer mothers. This lack of diversity was typical of the time. As hooks points out, "During the early stages of the contemporary women's liberation movement, feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants" (87). Patricia Hill Collins further explains: "Centering feminist theorizing on the concerns of white, middle-class women leads to two problematic assumptions. The first is that a relative degree of economic security exists for mothers and their children. The second is that all women enjoy the racial privilege that allows them to see themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy, instead of members of racial ethnic groups struggling for power" ("Shifting the Center" 169). The truth is that it was primarily middle-class, educated white women who viewed motherhood as a "serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and childcare" (hooks 87). As hooks powerfully articulates, had anyone asked Black women what they perceived to be obstacles to their freedom, motherhood would have come after racism, unemployment, and lack of education and training. Unfortunately, this lack of diversity in feminist and maternal theory is still evident today.

In 2016, O'Reilly, who coined the term "motherhood studies," published her field-defining book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*. This mother-focused brand of feminism is based on the following governing principles and objectives:

- Asserts mothers, mothering, and motherhood are worthy of scholarly inquiry.
- Regards mothering work as essential and should not be the sole responsibility of mothers.
- Challenges patriarchal oppression and empowers mothers.
- Shifts the child centredness that defines current scholarship and activism to a mother focus.
- Commits to social change and social justice to reposition mothering as a site of power.
- Understands mothering and motherhood to be diverse across race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and geographical location.
- Endeavours to establish maternal theory and motherhood studies as legitimate scholarly disciplines. ("Matricentric Feminism" 461)

Although matricentric feminist theory focuses on motherhood, it is both multi- and interdisciplinary, drawing not just from feminist theory but "anthropology, history, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, sexuality studies, and women's studies" (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism" 461). Although O'Reilly believes motherhood should be the business of feminism, she does not think it should by any means replace feminism ("Matricentric Feminism" 458). The goal of matricentric feminism is to emphasize that "the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women's role and identity as mothers" (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism" 458). As such, the needs of mothers are distinct from the needs of women generally, and these needs have not been met by feminists.

Hooks opines that early feminists did not give mothers or mothering the attention they deserved: "Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated" (88). In her article, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," Leslie McCall aptly acknowledges that one of the critiques of feminism is that it claims "to speak universally for all women" (1771). As such, "feminist researchers have been acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category" (McCall 1771). Leah Williams Veazey suggests that the reason motherhood is noticeably absent from most feminist scholarship is that many feminists feel ambivalent about motherhood. She posits that feminists "do not want to reify or essentialize it" and fear "that a focus on motherhood can be more easily co-opted for a conservative rather than a progressive agenda" (4). She notes, however, that "the vast majority of women will experience motherhood in their lifetime and it will affect their identity, their financial and material circumstances, their relationships, their social status, their epistemic status and so on" (5). In summary, motherhood's absence from feminist discourse serves to exclude the majority of women and contributes greatly to their isolation, subjugation, and lack of power.

Intersectionality: A Case for Mothers

Law professor, civil rights advocate, and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw "coined the term "intersectionality," a concept that is widely seen as a foundation of third- and fourth-wave feminism" (McCann 242). Crenshaw's influential article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" examines where racism and sexism intersect as witnessed through the lens of violence against women of colour. According to McCall, intersectionality "is the most important theoretical

contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (1771). Crenshaw asserts the following: "Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1242). She argues that feminists and antiracists advanced their respective causes in a mutually exclusive fashion, ignoring the fact that sexism and racism can simultaneously affect someone.

Crenshaw recognizes that because the identity of women of colour encompasses both gender and race, they can be marginalized by both identities: "The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women" (1252). Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard Eibach posit that because "people with multiple subordinate identities (e.g. African American women) do not usually fit the prototypes of their respective subordinate groups (e.g. African Americans, women), they will experience … 'intersectional invisibility' (qtd. in Carbado 814). The gap between the two identities of gender and race is essential to understanding the intersectionality framework. Women of colour are not fully represented by feminists or antiracists, as such they fall between the two and are politically invisible (Michaud, "Feminist Debates").

Before I make the case for motherhood to be included as an intersectional identity, I first address the assertions by some that intersectionality should exclusively be applied to race, gender, and class. Kathy Davis outlines how Crenshaw and other scholars have voiced concerns that the original concept of intersectionality has been distorted, inverted, corrupted, co-opted, and, as such, is now unrecognizable. Perhaps the most damning criticism comes from Vivian M. May. In May's article "'Speaking into the Void': Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash," she alleges that "hermeneutic marginalization … interpretive violence … the politics of citation … and dominant expectations or established social imaginaries on meaning-making" serve to support what intersectionality was designed to oppose, namely "misrepresentation, erasure, and violation" (94). Davis wonders "how we should view the transnational circulation of ideas and theories in a globalizing world and what this means for how critical feminist scholars ought to think about the ownership and uses of the knowledge we produce and disseminate" (114). In other words, in today's world, can anyone own or control the mobilization of knowledge?

Author and law professor Devon W. Carbado proclaims that scholars have used intersectionality across many disciplines and professions to support the important work they do. He adds, "Scholars have mobilized intersectionality

to engage multiple axes of difference—class, sexual orientation, nation, citizenship, immigration status, disability, and religion (not just race and gender)" (814-15). The bottom line to Carbado is that "many scholars frame intersectionality more narrowly than is theoretically necessary" and he hopes that "more scholars [will] push the theoretical boundaries of intersectionality rather than disciplining and policing them" (841). Although Crenshaw's view changed, her original thinking regarding intersectionality was much more inclusive. In "Mapping the Margins," she concludes: "This article has presented intersectionality as a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color. Yet intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" (1296). I agree with Crenshaw's original assertion and that of Carbado. Intersectionality is a framework that should be explored, utilized, shared, developed, and debated, even if it means that at times, it is exploited or misused. Knowledge and scholarship inside and outside the academy are meant to be studied, critiqued, discarded, and built upon by other scholars.

With the above in mind, I now make the case for motherhood to be included as an intersectional identity. Carbado states, "Black women were too different to represent either white women or Black men as a group" (813). As I explained previously, this gap between the two identities of gender and race is essential to understanding the intersectionality framework. We have already determined that feminists self-admittedly have done a poor job representing the interests of mothers. But that alone does not justify an intersectional identity. I assert that because mothers engage in unpaid labour, they have also been neglected by economists. As Eula Biss observes in her introductory essay "Of Institution Born," which was published in Rich's 1986 edition of *Of Woman Born*, "For many women, the forced labor of childbirth is followed by years of unpaid work" (xvi). To use Carbado's language, mothers are too different to represent women or workers as a group. An intersectional identity for mothers is needed to fill the gap between the two identities of women and workers.

Mothers as Labourers

Women have always received the short end of the stick when it comes to labour. Women's work at home and in the industrial economy was often tedious, repetitive, and low status; they often earned little to no pay (McCann). Unmarried women "were assumed to be working only until they found a husband" (McCann 48) and started a family. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels both wrote about the unfair treatment of labourers under the capitalist system and looked for socialist alternatives, they wrote little about women (McCann). In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they briefly discuss

how capitalism not only oppresses women but also subjugates them as second-class citizens (McCann). Marxist feminist theory has tried "to seek women's emancipation through the dismantling of the capitalist system" (McCann 52).

In the early twentieth century, labour unions were still only accessible to men, and women were forced to organize their unions (McCann). A brief history of the collective action of women in the US demonstrates that the focus of the women's labour movement was strictly on women working outside of the home:

- In 1828, Lowell Mill Girls became the first female union in the US.
- In 1866, formerly enslaved washerwomen unionized in Mississippi.
- In 1869, the Daughters of St. Crispin shoe workers became the first national women's US labour union (McCann).

In Russia, communist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai "placed female emancipation and gender equality at the center of the international socialist agenda" (McCann 55). In her book *Society and Motherhood*, published in 1916, Kollontai looks at motherhood through the prism of factory work (McCann). She argues that hard labour led "to health and social issues for women and children" and advocates for "improved working conditions and state recognition of the value of motherhood through the provision of national insurance" (McCann 55). Once again, however, the focus was on mothers working outside the home.

The Wages for Housework Campaign, launched by Marxist feminists in Italy, stressed that "all women, whether they work in the productive labour force or not, perform unpaid domestic labour" (McKeen 22). Their ultimate goal was the "abolition of domestic labour" as a means to facilitate financial autonomy for women and economic independence from men (McKeen 22). Canadian feminists adopted this perspective in the mid-1970s and formed Wages for Housework committees in various cities across the country including Toronto, Winnipeg and Regina (McKeen). Unfortunately, the Wages for Housework initiative was not embraced by feminists or Marxists of the time (McKeen). The women's liberationists viewed their ideas as "anti-feminist" and the socialists thought their Marxist vision was "narrow and uninspired" (McKeen 37). According to McKeen, the Wages for Housework movement did, however, "help spark a theoretical debate within feminism and Marxism that pushed forward socialist feminist theory" (37) while leaving mothers stuck in the private, domestic sphere. Regardless, the needs of mothers as workers were left unfulfilled by both feminists and Marxists.

This discussion of mothers as labourers would not be complete without including BIPOC mothers. As Collins points out, "Whether they wanted to or not, the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female

'occupation'" ("Meaning of Motherhood" 157). hooks contrasts the perspectives of white mothers with Black mothers. Whereas white women complained, "we are tired of the isolation of the home, tired of relating only to children and husband, tired of being emotionally and economically dependent; we want to be liberated to enter the world of work," Black women, who always worked outside of the home, were saying, "we want to have more time to share with family, we want to leave the world of alienated work'" (87).

There is no doubt that although motherhood can be a labour of love, it is still labour. As Friedan asserts:

> For women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence. Breaking through the barriers that had kept them from the jobs and professions rewarded by society was the first step.… But the economic part would never be complete unless a dollar value was somehow put on the work done by women in the home, at least in terms of social security, pensions, retirement pay. And housework and child rearing would have to be more equally shared by husband, wife, and society" (520).

Rich points out that white Marxist feminists have encountered difficulties combining feminist and class analysis (xliii). She further argues:

> The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. It cannot be compared with slavery or sweated labor because the emotional bonds between a woman and her children make her vulnerable in ways which the forced laborer does not know; he can hate and fear his boss or master, loathe the toil; dream of revolt or of becoming a boss; the woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. (Rich 36-37)

Although motherhood includes physical and emotional labour—a contribution that is often unrecognized, unpaid, and undervalued—it is estimated that women's unpaid domestic work in the US raises that country's gross domestic product by 25.7 per cent (McCann). Consequently, an intersectional identity would legitimately recognize mothers as the workers they are.

Conclusion

That motherhood has received little scholarly attention as a social intersectional identity shows that mothers are often overlooked as feminists and labourers. As indicated in the discussions above, many feminists feel ambivalence towards motherhood and are concerned that recognizing mothers may only serve to essentialize it. O'Reilly found that motherhood as a topic appeared in

less than three per cent of the top feminist journals, gender and women's studies textbooks, conference panels, and course syllabi ("Matricentric Feminism"). There remains a lack of scholarly attention to motherhood. Veazey argues that "motherhood's invisibility within intersectional analyses can be linked to its lack of visibility within feminist theory" (para. 1). She also articulates that although intersectionality is a "travelling theory" (Said qtd. in Veazey, para. 1) and that "motherhood is prominent in the works of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, and of course Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly, intersectional feminist scholarship as it is presented in contemporary textbooks and conferences, rarely considers motherhood" (Veazey 4).

Although most of the world's labour is done by women, this brief history of motherhood and labour above shows that more support and recognition have been given to women or mothers working outside the home. Any initiatives recognizing mothers as labourers inside the home have failed. Women and mothers are not synonymous and on behalf of all mothers—teen mothers, BIPOC mothers, gay mothers, trans mothers, adoptive mothers, foster mothers, stepmothers, disabled mothers, othermothers, fathers who mother, and last, but not least, white, suburban mothers—it is time to acknowledge their labour inside and outside of the home, not just their labour in the delivery room.

By recognizing mothers as their own intersectional social identity, the needs of this vital group of people will get the attention and recognition they deserve inside and outside of the home and inside and outside of the academy. Mothers must unite to demand a place at the intersectional table. When mothers are recognized with a separate intersectional identity, they will be in a better position to lobby for more support in public policy and their workplace—be it their home or elsewhere. More scholars will receive funding to research the unique position mothers are in and the oppression that they experience, and both feminists and economists will be more inclined to embrace this significant yet invisible group—and their labour of love.

Matricentric feminism can serve as a springboard towards these outcomes but only if feminists and economists include and value the contribution of mothers. The need is great. As hooks argues, "Right now in your community there are hundreds of thousands of children and mothers who desperately need individual and community support" (hooks 96). The time has come for feminists and economists to remember the womb and breast that fed them.

Endnotes

1. Some of the material in this article was previously presented at the Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of "the Feminine" Conference at Chapman University, CA, April 28-30, 2023.

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KATRINA MILLAN

Only Mom Can Save the World: Myths of Salvation and Destruction in Post-Apocalyptic Film

A version of this paper was originally given at the Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of the 'Feminine' conference at Chapman University in April 2023. It presents a comparative textual analysis of two recent films dealing with mothering in the post-apocalypse—A Quiet Place (2018) and Bird Box (2018)—to examine a new maternal myth taking shape, which I call "only mom can save the world." This work is broken into four sections. The first section confronts the irrefutability of white, heteronormative family structure in these works. The second section examines maternal subjectivity on screen. The third section deals with maternal regret, and the fourth section questions "mother love" as representative of a ubiquitous and unfailing survival strategy. I argue that although these films ostensibly present very different formulations of motherhood, they both ultimately work to affirm or re-establish white, middle-class heteronormative motherhood as the most vital form of emotional and social connection in the face of a collapsing world. Current myths of motherhood tell us that when deployed correctly, "mother love" has the power to shape the future. Considering contemporary anxieties surrounding ecological and economic disasters in our world, the need to examine these problematic myths takes on new weight and immediacy.

Introduction

What does it mean to mother at the end of the world? In our current moment of economic and ecological disaster, many caregivers are not only contending with the conventional questions of mothering according to stringent heteronormative dictates but also grappling with the perceived responsibility of safeguarding the future of humanity. This paper presents a comparative textual analysis of two films dealing with mothering in the post-apocalypse: *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *Bird Box* (2018). As these recent and decidedly

popular films demonstrate, dominant ideologies of normative motherhood and its perceived importance in our culture have remained ubiquitously dogmatic in popular media, despite the appearance of changing societal values surrounding motherhood. By looking at these films alongside works dealing with various iterations of normative motherhood in North America, as well as maternal subjectivity and regret, I argue that although these films ostensibly present different formulations of motherhood, they both ultimately work to affirm or reestablish white, middle-class heteronormative motherhood as the most vital form of emotional and social connection in the face of a collapsing world.

In her chapter "The Myths of Motherhood," Shari L. Thurer asserts that current myths of motherhood tell us that "the precise dose of a mother's love, punctually delivered, is the central factor in the well-being of the next generation, that is, the future" (191). This responsibility takes on new weight and immediacy when considered within the context of contemporary anxieties surrounding ecological and economic disaster. By examining these films in the context of prevalent constructions of normative motherhood in our immediate historical moment, we may see a new myth taking shape: Only mom can save the world.

White, Heteronormative Family Structure as Indestructible and Irrefutable

In *A Quiet Place*, the post-apocalyptic world is plagued by blind, clawed, fast-moving creatures who have incredibly acute hearing and hunt by sound alone. This movie follows one family: a father, a pregnant mother, their oldest daughter, and their younger son. Still reeling from the death of their third child a year earlier, the family readies itself for the imminent birth of the latest child and grapples with feelings of guilt and alienation in an almost idyllic farmhouse setting.

The film opens with the Abbot family scavenging for supplies in a run-down supermarket. Their normative family roles are immediately established. The mother cares for her sick son, while the oldest daughter cares for the youngest son. The father arrives with supplies he has scavenged elsewhere, including a gift of garden shears for the daughter. Soon after, he gently scolds the youngest son for picking up a potentially noisy toy, and the son is then comforted by the mother with a beatific smile and a gentle tousle of his hair. What *A Quiet Place* asserts from the first scene, and continues to reassert throughout, is that in the rubble of the apocalypse, the last vestige of humanity is the normative nuclear family.

This formation of the family—headed by one father to act as protector and provider and one mother to act as a caregiver (O'Reilly, "Normative Mother-

hood" 478)—has become so normalized that it is not only presented as a touchstone of normalcy in the post-apocalyptic setting of the film, but it is also assumed to outlive the rest of human culture and social ordering, without question or need of narrative explanation. In "The New Momism," Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels assert that "the white, upper-middle-class, married-with-children nuclear family remains as dominant as a Humvee, barreling through the media and forcing images of other, different, and just as legitimate family arrangements off to the side" (Douglas and Michaels 353). Indeed, the familial travails of the Abbots take centre stage and are linked explicitly with their experience of the post-apocalyptic space. The only way for them to survive is to resolve their heteronormative family structure and cohesion, somewhat ruptured after the death of the youngest child. In *A Quiet Place*, the nuclear family is presented as the only visible—and therefore only viable—means of survival in an unfamiliar world.

In *Bird Box*, the protagonist is immediately presented as an outlaw mother who needs to be corralled into normative motherhood. The film's narrative oscillates between the unfolding events of the apocalypse and the events of five years in the future. Sandra Bullock plays Malorie, a single, pregnant woman who experiences open regret about her pregnancy. The apocalyptic creatures in this film operate through sight, as anyone who views them finds themselves inexorably compelled towards suicide. Malorie finds herself ostensibly trapped in a house with an unlikely group of people, one of whom gives birth on the same day as she does and dies soon after. The timeline in the future sees Malorie and two five-year-old children, whom she calls "Boy" and "Girl" undertaking a long and treacherous journey down a river towards a supposed sanctuary.

Within the first few minutes of the movie, before the apocalyptic event, we see a pregnant Malorie visited by her sister, Jessica, who acts as a caretaker to her immature artist sister. She looks around the house-turned-studio crowded with paintings and tells Malorie that she should not have any more roommates after the last one, Ryan. When Malorie responds that he is "not a roommate," implying that he is the biological father of her baby, her sister responds harshly, "Uh, it turns out he kinda was. Anyway, you can't raise a kid here. Where would you even put her?" Our introduction to Malorie is rooted in her difference from normative constructions of family and motherhood.

Malorie is established as the biting yet still likable rebel, and what immediately establishes her as rebellious—accompanied by the signifiers of the alternative music she has blaring and the paint-splattered overalls—is her reluctance to mother within a heteronormative context, or even at all. "Normative motherhood," writes O'Reilly, "although representative of very few women's lived identities and experiences of mothering, is considered the normal and natural maternal experience: to mother otherwise is to be abnormal

or unnatural" ("Normative Motherhood" 478). Malorie's "abnormality" at the start of the film—shown through her age (Sandra Bullock was 54 at the time this movie was made), her singleness, her living space, and her lack of nurturance of any kind—is established as the starting point of her character arc. It is clear from the beginning that her arc is not leading her towards alternative mothering but rather towards learning and growing as a character in a way that aligns her with normative motherhood ideals. Her consistent resistance to normative motherhood and family formation is coded as immaturity and motherhood as her character's call to action.

These films present drastically different family formations and mothers at their centres: one squarely in line with normative dictates and one falling outside. However, one is presented as noble and courageous, a shelter from the harsh world outside, while the other is presented as severe, damaged, and needing emotional growth. In "The New Momism," Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels call attention to "dominant media imagery" that "serves to divide us by age and race and 'lifestyle choices,' and seeks to tame us all by reinforcing one narrow, homogenized, upper-middle-class, corporately-defined definition of motherhood" (353). Both these films reinforce these moralizing meditations on motherhood, which are meant to lead viewers to the same conclusion: Normative motherhood is the only way to mother successfully and only the heteronormative nuclear family structure provides safety and stability in times of crisis.

Mother Is Mother, and That Is All

These films present a familiar lack of maternal subjectivity, albeit from different angles. Again, *A Quiet Place* provides the most straightforward example of the monolithic mother; her identity is negotiated only through her role within normative motherhood. The mother, who is given the name "Evelyn" only as the credits roll, is the barefoot angel of the film, showing nothing but love, gratitude, and strength as she cradles her pregnant belly and moves through her bucolic life in flowing dresses. More importantly, there is not a single scene featuring the mother in *A Quiet Place* in which she is not providing acts of service for her family. *Every single action* we see her take throughout the film is done for the benefit of others. She is shown doing laundry, hanging it out to dry, cooking, serving dinner, cleaning, arranging the baby's room, teaching a math lesson to her son, comforting her children and her husband, and protecting her kids. Even in her one moment of peace, she listens to her baby's heartbeat through a stethoscope to find tranquillity.

Thurer's description of the experience of normative motherhood sheds light on Evelyn's lack of subjectivity:

> Even as mother is all-powerful, she ceases to exist. She exists bodily, of course, but her needs as a person become null and void. On delivering a child, a woman becomes a factotum, a life-support system. Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant. Once she attains motherhood, a woman must hand in her point of view. (191)

While Evelyn has control over the minute workings of the lives of her family, she is rendered almost invisible as a character outside of her inseparable roles as mother and wife. She has no desires, fears, or joys outside of her family. Even as the film defines her as a wife and mother alone, Evelyn herself espouses these definitions. Just after giving birth, she asks her husband tearfully, "Who are we if we can't protect them?"

Similarly, in *Bird Box*, Malorie responds to criticism of her lack of maternal affection with the aggressive assertion: "Every single decision I have made has been for them. Every. Single. One." The film's plot is centred on her pregnancy and her performance of motherhood, as she struggles to overcome experiences that are constructed by the narrative as poor parenting and fear of connection rather than as a battle to survive an untenable situation with two small children in her care. In "Faking Motherhood: The Mask Revealed," Susan Maushart writes the following about motherhood: "Instead of being seen as something we do, the work of mothering is something we are: the dancer becomes the dance" (280). In *Bird Box,* Malorie is consistently defined by her opposition or resistance to motherhood, specifically. As the film defines her as a mother, it also paradoxically defines her as a not-mother, the very antithesis of constructions of normative motherhood.

Responding to her harsh attitude towards the children, Malorie's partner Tom says, "You need to love them, knowing that you could lose them at any second. Okay? They deserve dreams, they deserve love, they deserve hope, they deserve a mother. They deserve a mother." Not only are the words "dreams," "love," and "hope" presented with the same lexical weight within the sentence as the word "mother," but they are also conditional upon the latter. The repetition of the last line signals to the audience that Malorie—despite giving birth to one child, informally adopting the other, and feeding, clothing, and keeping them safe—is not allowed the title of mother because she has not been mothering according to normative standards, and has also therefore been denying her children "dreams," "hope," and "love."

There is a cognitive dissonance present in the film: Malorie is simultaneously defined by her relationship to motherhood while also being denied the mother identity. She exists in a no woman's land, where she is a "dancer" denied the "dance," unable to construct an individual subjectivity outside of motherhood, nor gain access to even this identity. In "Maternal Regret," O'Reilly writes, "As the normative script positions motherhood as a woman's purpose and

fulfillment, it simultaneously and unsurprisingly delineates non-motherhood as absence and meaninglessness" (568). In essence, Malorie is either a mother —not just by caregiving but within the bounds of normative motherhood—or she is nothing.

Her entire trajectory leads to the moment of resolution—the last line of the film. After finally naming the children, she says "And I am their mother." In this moment, she can be seen as finally relinquishing her sense of self—her name—to provide selfhood to the children. This loss of identity is framed as a happy ending in *Bird Box*. Malorie has finally become "mother," as she has been called to be to safeguard the next generation. If "mother love" is all that can save the world, the mother must be mother alone and no one else. Saving the world, like raising the children, is her full-time job and requires the sacrifice of her identity and her sense of self.

Erasure and Eradication of Maternal Regret

Malorie is not allowed the title of "mother" until the film's end partially because of her experience with maternal regret. It is clear from the start that Malorie does not want to be a mother. Early on in the film, before the apocalyptic event, her sister and OBGYN tease her jointly when she calls her pregnancy a "condition." "Oh, don't you know," says the sister jokingly to the doctor, "if you don't acknowledge a thing, it just goes away." The doctor smiles and jokes back: "Oh really? All this time I had no idea." In the first scholarly study of maternal regret, Orna Donath describes a phenomenon she calls "passive decision making," signalled in part by the way many women described motherhood as simply happening to them rather than being something in which they were participants (O'Reilly, "Maternal Regret" 569). Malorie seems to fall neatly into this category. Both her doctor and sister tease her reaction to pregnancy as something that just happened to her and as something about which she has not yet made a concrete choice. We are introduced to Malorie after abortion is no longer an option (and is not mentioned at all); in a sense, the choice presented to her is either to embrace normative motherhood fully or to relinquish her child. The doctor, after telling her she cannot simply "ignore it and hope it goes away," hands Malorie a pamphlet on adoption.

She is told in so many ways by the women around her that motherhood is natural and instinctual. This is a narrative of biological destiny that is all too familiar to folks with uteruses, one that is essential to patriarchal control and asserts that birth and mothering are not only the only road to true fulfillment, but that we will naturally and instinctively know exactly what we are doing when we get there. Because Malorie does not expect the "immediate love affair" with her baby that her (apparently childless) sister predicts, she is already deemed unnatural and unfit. "When a horse gets pregnant it knows

right away," says her sister. "It changes the way it eats. It changes its gait. It bites all the other horses who come too close." Here, her sister calls upon that narrative of biological destiny, implying that because it is the "natural" order of things, her sister will of course love her baby and know how to care for it. O'Reilly writes the following on maternal regret:

> To be a non-mother is … to go off script with no story to be told. Simultaneously, normative motherhood renders maternal regret inconceivable and unimaginable: how can you regret something that is naturally ordained, freely chosen, and simply meant to be? Maternal regret subverts and disrupts normative motherhood and in particular, its mandate of essentialization; for if motherhood was truly natural, chosen, and supposed to happen, there could not be regret. ("Maternal Regret" 569)

Malorie's maternal regret is effectively erased by those around her and is sterilized by the film as a general fear of love and connection to other people. As soon as she reconciles these feelings at the film's turning point, she can love the children and show them nurturance and affection without hesitation. This aligns with the commonly-held notion that maternal regret is a phase to be moved through, a test to be passed. Once Malorie has passed this test, she can become a normative mother and save her children's lives.

In *A Quiet Place*, there is no maternal regret and not a shred of maternal ambivalence, even at the prospect of giving birth in a basement as silently as possible and then raising that child amid an apocalypse in which the slightest sound may end in grisly death. The mother adheres entirely to the dictates of normative motherhood and to the signifiers of "natural living." Such adherence anchors her to what O'Reilly calls "naturalization," which assumes that "maternity is natural to women—that is, all women naturally know how to mother—and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill" (478). Evelyn embodies the normalized version of motherhood to which the sister in *Bird Box* alludes. Motherhood is natural. It is biological destiny. Horses do not regret motherhood. They simply know now what their life's purpose is and adjust according to what "nature" dictates, as Evelyn does. In a discursive loop of creation and confirmation, this ideology of motherhood confirms our notions that maternal regret is an aberration, and that if we are confronted with maternal regret, as we are at the start of *Bird Box*, it is merely a phase of "growing pains" before the ultimate form of motherhood—as represented in *A Quiet Place*—is reached.

Evelyn's passive acceptance of her role without qualm or question and Malorie's ultimate and complete overcoming of her negative feelings towards pregnancy and motherhood both erase maternal regret and confirm normative

motherhood as the only available way to mother. These versions of mothers in popular media—both of which were written by men, not incidentally—are a form of control over women, which forces them to ignore or resent their feelings. O'Reilly asserts that the controlling and coercive pressure we put on mothers and people who mother forces them to hide feelings of maternal regret, which have become undoubtedly "tabooed" (570). In other words, as Maushart puts it, "Quite simply, what we see of motherhood is not what we get. As a result, the conviction that we are not measuring up becomes almost inevitable" (277). The media we consume plays a huge role in the creation and propagation of our social discourse, and what stories like this tell us is that maternal regret is not only impossible but also irreconcilable to a world teetering on the brink.

Mother Love Must Save the Family; Mother Love Must Save Us All

Social, cultural, and historical tensions shape the stories we tell, and those we choose not to. As Thurer explains, "The good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology" (190). In a world on the edge of economic and ecological collapse, where stories of disaster and survival proliferate, what stories are we telling about mothers? I argue that the perceived biological destiny of motherhood now includes the mandate that mothers are responsible for the future of the human race.

In *A Quiet Place*, both the eldest daughter and Evelyn feel responsible for the death of the youngest son. Much of the tension in the film comes from their insecurities about this guilt around the father, specifically. Immediately after telling her husband that their new baby is a boy, Evelyn says of their deceased son: "I could have carried him. He was so heavy. I can still feel the weight in my arms, small but so heavy. And my hands were free. I was carrying the pack but my hands were free. I could have carried him. I should have carried him." The husband says nothing to assuage his wife's guilt, only "you have to stop." As Thurer asserts, "Today, mother love has achieved the status of a moral imperative. Our current myth holds that the wellbeing of our children depends almost entirely on the quality of their upbringing (read mother, since it is she who usually has primary responsibility for raising children)" (190). The film's logic suggests not that the mother is unjustly blaming herself, but in fact that it was her failure to carry her son that led to his death, and the lesson she has learned is that she must devote every moment of her life to caring for their children if she wants them to survive. This lesson, articulated by the mother before the father's ultimate sacrifice, takes on new meaning in her subsequent single motherhood. It is she who must focus exclusively on the wellbeing of the children now. Even the minor comfort and companionship offered by the

husband is materially absent now, and the illusion that it was not a lesson for her alone is dissolved.

Many maternal theorists indicate a relationship between the directives of normative motherhood, the functioning of the state, and the maintenance of socioeconomic divisions. In their chapter, "It's Only Natural," Walkerdine and Lucey write that "Current ideas about children as having needs to be met by a mother are not universal, timeless laws, but were developed in specific historical and political conditions, which make mothering a function that is central to the way our modern state educational and social welfare practices operate" (123). Furthermore, it is mothers, specifically, who are seen as responsible for whether or not their children succeed under neoliberalism (O'Reilly, "Normative Motherhood" 488). In our current cultural climate, we might push this even further and say that rising anxieties about the precarity of global capitalism and the rapid deterioration of our livable ecological environments have meant that it is not only the "success" of children for which mothers are deemed responsible but also their very survival in an untenable situation. When taken to its most extreme, which these films among countless others do, we are presented with the argument that normative motherhood and its particular brand of attendant "mother love" is what will save the human race.

At the start of *Bird Box*, Malorie gives a stern speech to the children: "You have to do every single thing I say, or we will not make it. Understand? Under no circumstance are you allowed to take off your blindfold. If you find that you have, I will hurt you. Do you understand? … If you look, you will die." This immediate introduction to Malorie's parenting is no doubt meant to shock audiences, both in terms of content and delivery, which is harsh, clipped, and without comfort. It is in direct opposition to the "sensitive mother" Walkerdine and Lucey outline:

> The sensitive mother … hides the fear, the spectre of authoritarianism, or rebellion which ensue if the child realizes herself to be powerless. This powerlessness must be hidden from her at all costs. At risk is not only what is counted in terms of the development of the child, but also the smooth-running society peopled by those who do not believe they are powerless, who believe they have some control. (126)

In this case, it is not a fear of authoritarianism or rebellion that the children should be shielded from, according to normative definitions of motherhood, but the fear of the creatures. Instead, Malorie judges that the best way to keep the children safe is to ensure they are afraid—both of her and the creatures.

This instance is ultimately rectified in a moment of redemption at the film's climax after Malorie rouses from a hard fall in the woods near the sanctuary and realizes that the creatures are ordering the children to remove their

blindfolds in her severe voice. She calls out to them, trying to order them not to take off their blindfolds. She finds Boy, who is ringing a bell, and when she calls out to Girl, he says, "She's scared of you." This is the second major turning point for Malorie, and in this moment, she calls out, "I'm so sorry, sweet Girl. I'm so sorry. I was wrong; I shouldn't have been so harsh. I shouldn't have stopped you from playing. I shouldn't have ended Tom's story, because it wasn't finished!" At this moment, desperate to keep Girl safe, she sobs out an ending to the story her partner had tried to tell the children several scenes earlier, in which they are all together and happy. When Girl finally comes to her, she hugs them both close and whispers, "I love you so much" over and over.

Thurer asserts the following: "The current ideology of good mothering is not only spurious, it is oblivious of a mother's desires, limitations, and context, and when things go wrong, she tends to get blamed. This has resulted in a level of confusion and self-consciousness among mothers that their predecessors never knew" (188). What the ending of this film tells us in Malorie only being able to save both of the children and get them to the sanctuary through an expression of her "mother love," is that there is no context in which a mother might act outside of the bounds of normative motherhood and still ensure her children's survival. Malorie's severity, employed to keep the children safe, is shown to be the wrong way, and in fact damaging, as it was almost weaponized by the creatures to kill the children.

What is at stake is not simply Malorie's ability to mother within acceptable parameters, but the end of the world. These conflicts become inexorably entwined. As Thurer points out, "How our children turn out has become the final judgment of our lives" (188). The pull between safety and utter destruction is boiled down to the question of whether or not Malorie will overcome her fear and learn to become a normative mother—to love her children "properly." For the bulk of the film, Malorie seems to be operating under the idea that motherhood and "motherly love," as we know them under normative standards, are incommensurate with the world in which she is trying to navigate with two small children in tow. What the film ultimately argues in disproving her is that "mother love" is in fact what we need to survive.

O'Reilly asserts that "The demands made on mothers today are unparalleled in history" ("Normative Motherhood" 485). Indeed, in North America, mothers are often seen as solely responsible for the wellbeing of their children, with less support and higher demands. As Abigail L. Palko argues in "Monstrous Mothers," "Positioning mothers [as individually responsible] allows us to ignore any obligations we ourselves bear with respect to the horrors of the modern world" (583). In our current historical moment, in which our economic and ecological future is uncertain, when we say that our hopes lie in future generations, what ghosts are we creating of the mothers who raise them? And to that end, how many parents are being effectively

removed from conversations about human futurity when we insist on a white, heteronormative framework of caregiving? Are we building another myth with mother at the centre in which she is invisible yet wholly responsible? And what terrible and consuming blame rests on the other side of that massive responsibility? In other words, when we say that children are our future, what we are really saying is that only mom can save the world.

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AME KHIN MAY-KYAWT

Motherhood and Gender Role: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in The Greater Toronto Area

This article focuses on motherhood and gender roles concerning first-generation migrant women from Myanmar (Burma) who have relocated to Canada. It explores to what extent the women of the Myanmar diaspora challenge or still maintain their gender norms and relations embedded in the sending country's cultural context while simultaneously juggling the responsibilities among their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees through the lens of feminist mothering theory. The investigation is based on a review of maternal theorists and feminist migration scholars who explore the lived complexities of migrant mothers within the context of Southeast Asian migration to Western countries, as well as conducting a qualitative survey interview with eight employed Myanmar diasporic mothers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in 2020. Based on the findings, the paper argues that feminist mothering should be discussed as a combination of structural conditions (e.g., cultural beliefs, and material and economic demands) and subjective feelings about paid and unpaid work (e.g., domestic and child responsibilities).

Introduction

Despite the growing advocacy for shared parenting and work-life balance, many scholars have provided evidence that mothers remain the primary caregivers in affluent countries such as Canada (Wall and Arnold); the United States (Bianchi et al; Mannino and Deutsch); Great Britain (O'Brien; O'Brien et al.); and Australia (Baxter; Craig). Why do mothers remain the primary caregivers while participating in the labour market and contributing income to the household? As Bonnie Fox has discussed, the source of the problem appears to be because women and men remain intent on taking on conventional gender roles concerning parenthood (Fox 31).

My study of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) contributes to the literature on how the invisible immigrant mothers of Myanmar balance mothering and work responsibilities in the host country. Along with the pressures of their mothering roles, the women of the Myanmar diaspora also must endure the traditional gender stereotypes and norms that can emerge with migration and pose new challenges to them in the host community. For example, in the context of Myanmar, gender relations are structured not only via sociocultural norms but also via religious concepts. Nearly eighty-eight per cent of the Myanmar population is Buddhist and believes in the concept of the male power known as "hpon," granted to men at birth. This power positions men on a higher spiritual level than women and establishes them as the "natural" head of the family and household. Moreover, the concept of hpon entails that women are inherently inferior to men in religious status, thereby ensuring that patriarchal power is reinforced and reflected in society and its cultural practices (Tun et al. viii; Tun Thein 3-6; Harriden 26). In addition, my study explores to what extent the women of the Myanmar diaspora challenge or maintain their gender norms when they have to juggle the responsibilities among their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees; and contributes to female migration scholarship to understand how the concept of gender equality in the domestic sphere, embedded in the sending country's cultural context, positively or negatively, enhances how migrant women revise their gender relations concerning their spouses in the host country.

My investigation engages with the relevant works of maternal theorists and feminist migration scholars who explore the lived complexities of migrant mothers within the context of Southeast Asian migration to Western countries. For this study, eight GTA mothers were recruited from employed heterosexual couples who migrated to Canada from Myanmar either as immigrants or refugees. Since there is no adequate database of the Myanmar diaspora in the GTA from which to select respondents, a sampling of research subjects was achieved via a combination of convenience and snowball techniques (Bryman and Bell 245). The participants had to meet four specific requirements: (i) older than twenty, and first-generation migrant women; (ii) husbands must be of any ethnic origin also from Myanmar; (iii) living with at least one child under thirteen; and iv) employed (i.e. part-time, full-time, self-employed, and working-from-home) and contributing to the household income. The research participants belong to different ethnic groups of Myanmar. Five are Bamars; two are a mix of Kayin-Bamar and Kachin-Bamar, and one is Kayin. Among the sample, five are Buddhist, two are Christian, and one does not identify with any religion. The age range for my sample is between thirty-five and fifty-four. They have been in Canada for between six years and twenty-one years. Six participants became mothers in Canada (i.e., their children were born in Canada). All speak English fluently and all the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Theoretical Perspective: Feminist Mothering

Feminist mothering is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood and functions as a counter-narrative of motherhood to "imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women." The difference in theorizing feminist mothering with other feminist theories is that it is determined more by what it is not in patriarchal motherhood that causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 136). According to O'Reilly, feminist mothering does not limit childrearing to the biological mother, and it redefines mothering as being an explicitly and profoundly political and social process (*Matricentric Feminism* 145-47). Moreover, O'Reilly defines feminist mothering as a practice that seeks to grant mothers agency (i.e., mothering practices that facilitate women's power in challenging aspects of institutionalized motherhood), authority (i.e., confidence and conviction in oneself), authenticity (i.e., being true to oneself in making a decision that is consistent with one's own beliefs and values), autonomy (i.e., holding power in the household), and advocacy/activism (i.e., the potential political and social dimensions of motherwork expressed in antisexist childrearing or maternal activism)—all denied to them in patriarchal motherhood.

Maternal theorists discuss that women have specific rights in womanhood and motherhood via the concept of feminist mothering, which resists normative motherhood and stereotypical expectations in a patriarchal society. For example, Tuula Gordon's study of feminist mothers explores how these women conduct their lives according to alternative ideologies, which relate to five factors: (i) how they challenge and criticize myths of motherhood; (ii) how they consider their right to work; (iii) how they raise their children in antisexist and antiracist ways; (iv) their co-mothering expectations for their spouses in daily lives; and (v) how they are politically active (149). Similarly, Rose L. Glickman argues that no matter how ordinary the feminist mothers' lives seem from the perspectives of outsiders and casual observers, their feminism intensely resisted conventions (22)

Additionally, Tuula Gordon's study of feminist mothers alerts us to the possibility that resistance entails making different choices about how a woman wants to practice mothering (58). The studies of both Gordon and Glickman, cited above, look specifically at mothers who identify as feminists (44), whereas the women in Horwitz's study, believe that they resist the dominant discourse of mothering but may or may not identify as feminists (45). In this regard, O'Reilly underlines the significant differences between "empowered mothering" and "feminist mothering," even though the two seem similar. Empowered mothering signifies a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood. The primary focus of "empowered mothering," which refers to the theory and

practice of mothering that recognizes how women, children, and society benefit when women live their lives as mothers from positions of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 190-191).

Yet feminist mothering refers to a particular style of empowered mothering which is developed and expressed through a feminist identification or consciousness. Moreover, feminist mothering attempts to balance the needs of women in managing multiple identities (e.g., mother, wife, caregiver, and student/employee). Therefore, a feminist mother is a woman whose mothering, in theory, and practice, is shaped and influenced by feminism (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 191). For example, some studies (Horwitz; Christopher) show that women resist patriarchal motherhood to have a higher quality of life, but their specific resistances are more personal than political and do not originate from an awareness of how motherhood functions in a patriarchal society as a cultural and/or ideological institution to oppress women. Some employed mothers' justification for their choice of employment could be to fulfil their needs, hobbies and interests rather than economic needs and to resist a sexist environment or patriarchal culture. By contrast, those mothers who practise feminist mothering see the development of a mother's selfhood as being beneficial to both her motherhood and her child(ren). They do not see this process as being antithetical to their interests as it is often assumed to be in patriarchal motherhood. They are also empowered mothers because they do not regard 24/7 mothering (i.e., full-time intensive mothering that is demanded by patriarchal motherhood) as necessary for children, and they do not put their children's needs before their own but instead look to motherhood to define and realize their identities as mothers (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 191).

In essence, empowered mothering is a subject of feminist mothering, and its diverse practices constitute the culmination of mothers' efforts to contest sociocultural myths surrounding the right to work, the proliferation of anti-sexist sentiments while childrearing, and the actualization of equitable parenting practices among spouses. Furthermore, feminist mothering embraces and promotes the idea that women need to challenge pre-existing stereotypical notions of the roles of mothers while also striving to find a balance promoting social continuity and well-being. Additionally, feminist mothering is equally concerned with feminist practices of gender socialization and models of motherhood that relate to raising a new generation of empowered daughters and empathetic sons (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 193-95). Feminist mothers are aware that the changes they pursue in childrearing are made possible only through changes in mothering via the feminist concepts of identity and subjectivity relating to all empowered mothers.

Findings and Discussions

Nuances

There are nuances in how Myanmar migrant mothers in my sample practice empowered mothering concerning its potential benefits and how these mothers' subjective or emotional feelings contradict the theory of feminist mothering when it comes to participating in paid work. My participants reconstructed motherhood-mothering about their perceptions of successful motherhood, which were centred on the needs and benefits of their children rather than on the antisexist childrearing and women-centred practices of mothering. This general finding illustrates how mothers put their children's needs before their own, thereby conforming to the third rule of "good" motherhood (i.e., mothers must always put their children's needs before their own) as dictated by patriarchal ideology (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 146).

Another issue is that the "supermom model" (i.e., a mother who successfully manages a home and raises her children while also being employed) developed by Myanmar migrant mothers tends to become complicated when analyzing whether it is empowering for these mothers. The continuation of some traditional patriarchal beliefs in the context of the home country along with the choice of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers to prioritize their mothering duties and commitments in family relations within their gendered realities leaves these women in a double shift (unpaid housework and mothering plus paid work). Additionally, being positioned under the supermom model creates extra emotional work, which Arlie Hochschild (1997) identifies as constituting a "third shift" (requiring planning and scheduling quality time for children and managing children's resistance) in the host country.

Moreover, the participants felt that their employment increased their gender power and autonomy in the family by simply engaging in additional roles via the notion of being the "woman" of the house (e.g., decision maker, financial controller, advisor, and administrator). However, these roles entailed an overload of unpaid domestic work. Some examples are as follows:

> My role in the family includes but is not limited to being the decision maker of important decisions such as applying for a mortgage, house moving, financial decisions, etc. This is because my husband is not fluent in English and has not adapted as well as I have. (Maywin).

> I control cash flow of the household income to balance expenses and total income. My husband is very honest with me and reports me any single dollar income of him. He is an engineer, and he knows that he is not good at financing and budgeting. (Lily).

The respondents' perceptions of being a "primary caregiver" are associated with the amount of time spent with their children during out-of-school hours combined with attempts to decipher the needs and desires of their children. This process is also influenced by replacing the mother's absence while working with family members, spouses, and appropriate programs for the children's wellbeing. Such perceptions relate to the "intensive mothering" ideology outlined by Sharon Hays (qtd. in Christopher 75), even though biological mothers do not devote their entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being on a 24/7 basis to their children. The central aim of feminist mothering is to reclaim the power that the mother lost as a result of patriarchy.

The participants indicate that they do not limit childrearing to themselves as the biological mothers. They get fathers to be involved in childcare, and they create happy lives outside of motherhood via nuanced notions of "empowered mothering" (i.e., they seek to attain the following attributes of empowered mothering without challenging normative gender roles: agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy). The majority of the participants addressed how they appreciated the benefits of co-mothering with spouses. Particularly, Thidar, Pandora, and Cindy believed that co-mothering benefited the children in two aspects: the children could enjoy the benefits attained from the differing mothering ideologies of two parents, and the children would receive full love from two parents along with a life of safety.

Gender Roles vs. Empowered Mothering

My participants possessed an understanding of empowered mothering in the host country that was different because of the following three interrelated factors: (i) the influence of the sending country's values and customs; (ii) the general attitudes towards "gender equality" concerning married couples, which related to "doing our gender roles, no problem"; and (iii) the lack of challenges in gender renegotiation between spouses (in the host country) due to the general assumption that women's employment contributes to the maintenance of a happy married life.

Historical and political factors have also influenced Myanmar's patriarchal setting and these factors have shaped how diasporic Myanmar women understand their gender roles and womanhood/motherhood while also underscoring how they interpret the meaning of "feminism" in the host country. Concerning social and cultural contexts, a Burmese woman may not necessarily need consent from her husband to work outside of the home if there are extended family members who are available to take care of the children. Myanmar women are responsible for most domestic chores; however, they have considerable authority in the home when it comes to managing cash flow and family finances (Hays 1; Mya Sein 4). Such sociocultural concepts

contribute when the mothers redefined mothering and justify their decisions to work (as being political or maternal activism) after they become mothers:

> Mothers should have their own choices of lifestyle whether being home for children or work outside but with their mothering ways … let my child learn that a good mom/housewife does not need to be with kids always. (Lily)

> We women have so much potential when you have confidence and not thinking that you are a woman but think in a way that we all are equal and human beings. We have to continue supporting to pave the equal rights for men and women. (Cherry)

> Women contribute as much as men in the society. Women are educated and successful in workplaces and raising the family at the same time. We should have rights equally in terms of job place and fairness. (Pandora).

It is a culturally common Myanmar practice that a father's income is given to the mother, who can then design her budget in a very pragmatic way to allow for payments towards food, clothing, shelter, health, and family education (Jotikadhaja and Nyunt 1). In this regard, the participants expressed their additional roles with confidence, pride, and kindness rather than complaining that their husbands lacked skills. Such behaviour results in the participants managing domestic issues in the household via a certain power related to their given gender roles. Some examples are:

> My husband is very honest with me and reports [to] me any single dollar [of his] income.

> My husband also always asks me to decide for child matters [even though] he may suggest something. (Cindy)

> I am [the] advisor of the family because I enjoy suggesting better ways. (Myat)

> I make most of the final decisions on my own because I want to share the burden of responsibility with my husband and help him keep his peace of mind. (Cherry).

Concept of Gender Equality

Another interesting point is that the majority of the participants understood gender equality consists of four aspects: respect; autonomy; sharing domestic work and childcare; and complementing different skills and different gender roles. In essence, they believed that these were the key elements of their gender relations. Among the participants, the meaning of "respect" was not viewed as

"superior or inferior" dynamics due to being men and women. Additionally, the participants emphasized that "respect" was a means of maintaining love between the spouses. For instance, Pandora affirmed that she enjoyed gender equality at home: "My husband gives me respect with love. We have no superiority because of men and women. Respecting each other is the key to our relationship."

"Respect" became interrelated with attaining "autonomy," for example when the husband did not reject the wife's decision of not wanting to be a full-time housewife. Cherry explained that she enjoyed gender equality and self-identified as a feminist: "I do quite enjoy gender equality at home. I appreciate how he adapts to my nature of being a feminist and respects my decision for not wanting to be a full-time housewife. I want to be active, productive and contribute to society." Cindy, Thidar, Mar Mar, Maywin, and Myat indicated that they did not have gender issues and that they enjoyed gender equality in their homes because their husbands shared childcare duties and domestic work when required.

In summary, the findings from this section suggest that traditional patriarchal beliefs concerning gender equality within the contexts of the sending countries influence subjective aspects of motherhood. All the participants from my sample do not regard their mothering responsibilities as oppressive or as an example of gender discrimination. Moreover, the continuation of some traditional patriarchal beliefs that hold these mothers responsible for caregiving positively contributed to developing empowered mothering (i.e., possessing the attributes of agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy). General meaning and practices of empowered mothering pertain to respecting and appreciating gender roles rather than challenging gendered childrearing, which contributes to the general participant assumption of "doing our gendered roles, no problem."

Are They Feminists?

When I asked whether they self-identify as feminists, six responded "yes" because they supported and practised gender equality at home. Some of the mothers self-identifying as feminists still follow Myanmar traditions, such as offering the first-choice morsel to their husbands when having a meal together and considering the husband as "Lord of the forefront of the house" or "Ein Oo Nat" via notions of "respect" and "love." They did this regardless of whether or not they identified with a religion (i.e., Buddhist/Christian) in the survey questions. Two mothers emphasized the importance of gender equality beyond the family by expressing concerns about the issue for other women in society.

In contrast, two other participants indicated that they are not feminists and do not have gender issues at home where they enjoy gender equality. For these

two mothers, "gender equality" is more personal than political, although they nonetheless qualify as empowered mothers whose mothering practices represent a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood. Specifically, these two mothers consistently emphasized the importance of co-mothering when enduring employment and motherhood challenges in Canada; co-mothering is one of the key factors when it comes to reframing "good mothering" and engaging in a renegotiation of gender roles in a new land. Overall, my participants signified a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood via their own choices and ideologies, which arose about how they wanted to practice mothering. From a feminist researcher's point of view, I conclude that most of my participants tend partially to seek feminist mothering via their perceptions of empowered mothering. I say "partially" because they do not emphasize antisexist childrearing and maternal activism, which are the significant and essential tasks of feminist mothering addressing the needs of mothers on behalf of children and feminist childrearing for children.

Historical and political factors have also influenced Myanmar's patriarchal setting, and these factors have shaped how diasporic Myanmar women understand their gender roles and womanhood/motherhood while also underscoring how they interpret the meaning of "feminism" in the host country. Social rejections of feminism in Myanmar and the general reluctance of Myanmar women to identify as feminists have happened because there is no actual Burmese translation of the term "feminism," which is mostly referred to as "ei-hti-ya-wada" (or "female ideology"), meaning something that focuses only on women's issues. In this regard, most Burmese people perceive feminism as biased in favour of women or as an ideology that promotes female dominance and misandry. Such a misperception has cultivated divergence and competition between men and women rather than fostering social cohesion and gender complementarity. As a result, many men tend to perceive feminists as misandrists. Additionally, the Burmese method of translation and negative labelling has turned many people away from feminist causes (Than et al. 1-2).

Moreover, as Elizabeth Jane Tregoning Maber has discussed, the term "feminism" has been viewed as problematic within various contexts of Myanmar society, where English language terms are employed for a variety of strategic reasons that include both emphasis and obfuscation (423). Traditional groups and state-sponsored women's groups in Myanmar (e.g., the Maternal and Child Welfare Association [est. 1991]; the Myanmar National Committee for Women Affairs [est. 1996]; and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation [est. 2003]), which was formed by the military government and led by the wives of generals and other authorities, regard feminism as a tool of Western neo-imperialism that allows the West to exert control over developing countries. These traditional groups believe that feminism demands radical imposed change while ignoring the values of local people. Moreover, these

state-sponsored women's organizations only serve to strengthen traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity, thereby beginning a rivalry of ideology between the traditional femininity existing inside the country and the progressive feminism that existed outside the country (Tun et al. 10, 15).

Two out of the six participants self-identifying as feminists understood that the terms "feminism" or "feminist" relate to gender equality beyond the family (i.e., more political than personal issues), though they have maintained that they enjoy gender equality at home.

> We have to continue supporting equal rights for men and women. But beyond doubt, we still do have gender discrimination and we are not quite there yet even though we are in the twenty-first century. (Cherry).

> I think I am a feminist if I relate to how I perceive gender-related issues. For example, I dislike [women being] treat[ed] unfairly (domestic violence by men at home, wage differences at work, different requirements for school admission to certain institutions and politics especially in Burma), as well as restricting women in dress and their women's rights. In my home, I am fortunate to enjoy gender equality. But what about other women? Gender equality is not only for one family and one community. Therefore, we [both men and women] continue to support with regards to equal rights for men and women. We also should be role models for our children to respect gender equality from one generation to another. (Lily).

These two mothers believe that gender equality does not pertain to only one single family or community but instead has more to do with society (e.g., violence against women and equal rights/equal pay between men and women). In particular, two of the participants indicated their concerns about gender equality in Myanmar and girls/women being unfairly treated in university admissions and the political arena. They also emphasized the importance of receiving continual support from both men and women in Myanmar to challenge these issues from one generation to the next.

By contrast, some participants simply related the term "feminism" to the gender issues they experience at home. They do not self-identify as feminists so long as they enjoy gender equality in their homes (i.e., the issue of "gender equality" is more personal than political). My observations relate to empowered mothers' differing perceptions of "feminism" and underline the possibility of a rivalry of ideology existing between traditional femininity and progressive feminism within the same diaspora (i.e., the feminism rooted inside Myanmar and the progressive feminism existing outside the country).

Conclusion

I acknowledge that my interview participants are not representative of all migrant Myanmar women residing in Canada. Nonetheless, this article reveals how cultural and traditional beliefs travel via mothering practices from the Global South to the Global North; it contributes to the existing literature on motherhood studies by providing an overall caregiving narrative focusing on the minority of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers who have been underresearched in mothering and migration scholarship. My participants do not limit childrearing to themselves as the biological mothers; rather, they get the fathers involved in childcare so that they can create a happy life outside of motherhood via a nuanced notion of empowered mothering (i.e., they seek to attain the attributes of empowered mothering—that is, agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy—without challenging normative gender roles).

The findings suggest that these mothers maintain some aspects of the patriarchal culture of the home country via assumptions about their own traditional values and cultural beliefs, thereby reinforcing empowered mothering when it comes to switching gender roles. This phenomenon is not regarded as a problem by the spouses. Most of the participants seek feminist mothering via their perceptions of empowered mothering. However, they do not emphasize antisexist childrearing and maternal activism, which are the essential tasks required by feminist mothering. In the Myanmar cultural context, it seems that firm gender divisions between men and women are not perceived as discriminatory but as upholding feminine privilege oriented towards fairer gender concepts. Such beliefs about gender roles and gender equality in the Myanmar context reinforce how men perform the role of the "good man" of the house and women perform the role of the "good woman" of the house. The foundational belief for Myanmar women pertains to upholding the overarching cultural belief that mothering is their normal duty—a belief that is unrelated to notions of oppression.

In summary, the findings from my empirical work underline how feminist mothering fails to consider the possibility of contradiction between theory and mothers' subjective or emotional feelings when it comes to participating in paid work. Consequently, I argue that feminist mothering should also be discussed as a combination of both structural conditions (e.g., cultural beliefs, material, and economic demands) and subjective feelings about paid and unpaid work (e.g., domestic and child responsibilities) rather than relying on a consistent framing of feminist mothers as absolute nonpatriarchal mothers. This is because no patriarchal setting is quite the same or continues to be the same over time when it comes to culture, racial dynamics, and social class differences (Kaufman 162).

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AMBER POWER

Updating *The Mother*: Contemporary Intermedial Approaches to Brecht's 1931 "Learning Play"

This article argues for the continuing relevance of Bertolt Brecht's 1931 "learning play," The Mother, through a comparative assessment of two of its recent productions by experimental performance collectives My Barbarian (in 2013) and The Wooster Group (in 2021–22). Through analyzing the productions' respective intermedial performance strategies, this article explores how both collectives use Brecht's century-old play to address contemporary social and political challenges while privileging motherhood as a powerful mode of resistance.

Introduction

In January 1932, one year before Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, Bertolt Brecht's didactic and politically incendiary play *Die Mutter* ("The Mother") (1931) premiered at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin and subsequently played to the small clubs and community halls in nearby workers' districts (Baxandall 10). Adapted from Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel of the same name and written in the style of a Lehrstück ("learning play"), *The Mother* tells the story of an older, illiterate Russian widow named Pelagea Vlassova who, after witnessing the suffering and exploitation of her adult son and the other factory workers in her town, becomes radicalized and joins the Bolshevik Revolution. Throughout the play—which takes the form of fourteen short episodes and thirteen songs—the audience observes a great shift taking place within the central character of the mother: Pelagea largely quits the domestic sphere, learns to read, and becomes increasingly involved in the struggle for workers' rights, eventually rising to a position of leadership within the movement after her son is executed. Gorky had penned his novel as a means of resuscitating the proletariat in Russia after the Tsar's bloody

suppression of the 1905 revolutionary movement (Baxandall 9). Brecht's adaptation of Gorky's text is widely regarded by critics as having been similarly conceived as a show of support for the then-struggling German Communist Party and as a means of recruiting women, specifically, into the organization (Baxandall 28; Lennox 86). That Brecht cast his wife and longtime collaborator, the recognizable and much-beloved German actress Helene Weigel, as the first Pelagea perhaps speaks to the significance of the role for appealing to German women.

To this end, and in his production notes on *The Mother*, Brecht acknowledges that the play "was addressed mainly to women" and that its goal "was to teach certain forms of political struggle to the audience" (62). Brecht estimated about fifteen thousand working-class German women saw the production during that first tour and reacted, more than any other cohort, "with particular liveliness" to the "situations" presented (62). While Brecht's aim of instructing German workers in the strategies of labour organizing and political dissent was summarily and violently suppressed by the arrival of the Third Reich, it is inspiring to imagine the civic and political potential of those fifteen thousand working women—many of whom might have identified as mothers—engaging with this Marxist play and moving collectively towards a revolutionary consciousness of their own.

In recent years, contemporary theatre artists have returned to and updated *The Mother* through newer and more sophisticated technological strategies—comingling elements of film, recorded audio, video installation, and digital media—to more deeply exploit the Brechtian disruption that can often occur for a spectator when confronted with the convergence of media and live performance. These interdisciplinary, multi-media experiments, which I interpret through the lens of intermedial performance scholarship, have enabled contemporary theatre artists to explore new and previously untapped dimensions of the play's themes of motherhood and social change while staying true to Brecht's Marxist ideas.

I argue for the versatility and continuing relevance of Brecht's 1931 learning play, *The Mother,* and for the character of the mother as an agent of revolutionary transformation through a comparative assessment of two recent productions by US-based experimental performance collectives My Barbarian (in Los Angeles in 2013) and The Wooster Group (in New York City in 2021-22). Through investigating the productions' respective intermedial performance strategies, I also explore how both collectives use Brecht's didactic, hundred-year-old play as an allegory to comment on present-day challenges, including the intractability of capitalism, the broadening of the cultural wars, and the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. My project follows a similar logic as it was inspired by and attempts to build upon the significant archival work done by Brechtian scholar Laura Bradley about the play's unique production history

and its remarkable, while not always uniform, adaptability across generations and cultural contexts.

As a work of interdisciplinarity, this article draws on diverse categories of evidence in support of the comparative analysis. Contemporary working scripts reveal unique changes to Brecht's original 1931 text. Video and digital photo documentation offer a visual representation of the performances and specify the intermedial elements, and critical reception provides insight into critical and audience reactions to the productions. Artist interviews offer a deeper understanding of creative processes. Brechtian scholarship situates contemporary revivals of *The Mother* within the play's significant production history, while intermedial scholarship is used to understand how their sophisticated incorporation of film and digital media is both connected to but also expands upon Brecht's dramaturgy.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first section, I briefly trace the genesis of the most germane (and enduring) of Brecht's aesthetic strategies—specifically those entailing epic stage design—to better locate in the second and third sections the revision of those tactics in the contemporary adaptations of *The Mother* by My Barbarian and The Wooster Group. The findings from my comparative analysis of the two performances in the conclusion draw connections (and distinctions) between the original twentieth-century Lehrstück and its twenty-first-century heirs and shed light on the continuing power of Brecht's play to present a revolutionary vision of motherhood.

The Epic Stage: Brecht's (and Piscator's) Dramatic Theory

Brecht believed that a radical transformation of society could not succeed without an equally radical theatre transformation (Brecht 23). The playwright had grown wary of the realistic and naturalistic modes that had emerged in nineteenth-century theatre, which seemed to him to serve as powerful delivery systems of a dominant, capitalistic ideology. He wanted to provoke the audience into questioning the economic and social forces that shaped their quotidian lives—to disrupt their habitual modes of reception to get them to think critically about their exploitative and increasingly jingoistic world. As such, Brecht, together with fellow German director Erwin Piscator—the Dada-adjacent pioneer of intermedial stage design—contributed to the development of a dramatic theory known as epic theatre. According to Brecht, the goal of this new dramaturgy was "to teach the spectator a most definitely practical conduct that is intended to change the world" (Brecht, *The Mother* 133)—transforming the spectatorial act from one of passive absorption to one of critical engagement. Core to this strategy was Brecht's concept of Verfremdungseffekt ("alienation effect"), in which certain interrupting or distancing techniques—including visible displays of stage mechanics, the use

of informational placards, literary captions and documentary films, and actors stepping away from scenes to directly address the audience—work to disrupt the illusionistic and catharsis-driven tactics of Aristotelian dramatic theatre. No longer would plays "assist the spectator in surrendering" themselves to "empathy" or overidentifying with the characters on stage (Brecht, *The Mother* 8). Instead, they would provoke critical engagement and a heightened awareness of the social and political realities depicted on the stage. When viewed within the context of German society's frighteningly quick capitulation to fascist thought, Brecht's and Piscator's development of a didactic, dialectical stage can also be seen as an act of resistance.

The prominent cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin observed that epic theatre was best defined "in terms of the stage than of a new drama" (98). A Berliner entering *Die Mutter*'s epic theatrical space in 1932 would have been greeted with a deconstructed design consisting of white sheets stretched between poles of a metal frame (which would serve as host to a series of projected political slogans and pictures) with wooden doors that could be opened and closed and a motley selection of instruments and musicians located onstage and in full view of the audience (Bradley 41). This renegade approach to mise-en-scène would have been jarring for theatregoers accustomed to the conventions of early twentieth-century stage design, which often included expensive and voluminous stage curtains cresting over large-scale and elaborately painted set pieces and musicians hidden away either offstage or in an orchestra pit. Critics at the time referred to *The Mother's* stage design as "primitive" and as nothing more than "hanging out dirty sheets" (qtd. in Bradley 41). However, the epic construction—rooted in Russian agitprop practices, pioneered by Piscator and utilized by left-wing and worker's theatre at the time—was highly strategic in its goals: it was easily collapsible and therefore mobile; it was economical and reflected the spare language of the play. It was lacking in specificity and therefore easily serving Brecht's aim of using Russia as a model for Germany and, most significant for my purposes here, was particularly suited to the incorporation of projected media.

Initially, Brecht had planned to project a two-minute-long documentary sequence depicting the Russian Revolution at the conclusion of *The Mother* before the German police censored it (*Brecht on Film and Radio* 260-61). The projected media that did survive still managed to tout political slogans and caustic political commentary as well as intertitles and simple images, which, in turn, alerted audiences to the contradictions and injustices of the existing class structure (Bradley 38-39). To Brecht, these filmic aspects functioned "as a kind of optical chorus" with the power to "confirm or dispute" the audience's reality (Brecht, *Brecht on Film and Radio* 6-7). Roswitha Mueller posits that Brecht's early experiments with the moving image "impressed upon him the aesthetic exigencies specific to film" and ensured that "Brecht the dramatist

never competed" but instead "sought a discourse" with film (3). Consequently, and through a thoughtful treatment of media within its mise-en-scène, Brecht's epic stage alerted audiences to the artificiality of the theatre—thwarting their ability to identify with a dominant ideology and encouraging them to become critically engaged spectators.

Everyone's A Mother! My Barbarian's production of *The Mother and Other Plays* (2013)

The performance collective My Barbarian was established in 2000 in Los Angeles by Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade to, according to their artist statement, "use performance to theatricalize social problems" (*My Barbarian*). With socially-minded productions that collage reworked historical texts, video art, painting, sculpture and drawing, DIY musical composition, and a healthy dose of thrift-shop glamour, My Barbarian's interdisciplinary and multimedia practice is possibly best understood through the group's concept of "showcore"—a framework that Jazmina Figueroa recently interpreted as "a self-reflexive methodology tied to the histories of musical theatre and queer camp aesthetics … and more noncanonical show-biz devices" ("In Pursuit of the Masquerade"). Artist Farrah Karapetian interprets the collective's performance practice as one of "sophisticated play" inspired by "Brecht's notion that didactic theater is more effective when it is entertaining" (33).

My Barbarian's adaptation of Brecht's *The Mother* was initially presented in 2013, just two years after the populist Occupy Wall Street movement commandeered Zuccotti Park to protest the rampant display of economic inequality exposed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. The company's decision to stage its Marxist play within the white cube of the Vielmetter Gallery in Los Angeles and not in a traditional theatre or a community hall points to an intentional blurring of art and activism. This presentational strategy also gestures towards My Barbarian's transgressive approach to interdisciplinarity, which routinely interchanges the distinct spheres of the theatre and the gallery as a means of problematizing both (Figueroa). Initially titled *Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse* (2013) and later retitled *The Mother and Other Plays* (2014), the final work at Vielmetter took the form of a multimedia exhibition consisting of the following diverse elements:

i. a live staging of Brecht's Lehrstück (loosely adapted from the original text and utilizing epic strategies of song and dance, gestic acting, improvisation, and digitally projected intertitles and artworks);
ii. a collection of handmade papier-mâché theatrical masks and oil stick drawings activating the walls of the gallery space; and,

iii. a twenty-nine-minute-long video installation initially titled *Working Mother* (2013) and subsequently retitled *Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse* (2014) which cites (both in the title and some segments of the video) Eleanor Roosevelt's iconic 1947 human rights document and Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis-inflected essay from 1929.

The material copresence of these various media forms and the highly layered intertextuality of the art objects, the performance, and the video installation encompass Chiel Kattenbelt's definition of an intermedial artwork in which a "co-relationship and mutual influence between different media … challenge and subvert previously existing medium-specific conventions and allows for new dimensions of perception and experience to be explored" (24-25). An example of this reciprocal influence becomes evident when examining the dynamic role of music within the work. One of My Barbarian's adapted songs, "Your Son Has Been Shot," is performed live during the collective's staging of *The Mother and Other Plays* to mark the moment when Pelagea learns that her only son, Pavel, has been killed. It later functions as a standalone Brechtian "interruption" within the video installation. However, in its later, remediated iteration, the song is performed and filmed outdoors against the backdrop of a sun-drenched Los Angeles canyon, utilizing choreography and slick cinematographic strategies, such as close-ups and tilted camera angles. The saturated colours and cinematic sheen of this catchy musical number initiate another moment of estrangement when juxtaposed alongside the song's wrenching lyrics (adapted by Gaines from Brecht's original text):

> Your son has been shot.
> He went to the wall,
> Built by men, just like him,
> And men, like himself,
> Made the weapons that shot him,
> Made the bullets that pierced his chest.
> Your son has been shot.

Thus, My Barbarian's contemporary revision of Brecht's Lehrstück introduces new intermedial applications for the age-old Marxist text; its theatrical (and video) intervention in the gallery also disrupts the rules governing spectatorship in such elite spaces.

Significantly, My Barbarian's multimedia performance approach in *Universal Declaration* also highlights the collective's queer, BIPOC, and feminist histories to expand the motherhood definition beyond an essentialist one. Specifically, the collective's reliance on participation, projections, and video installation invites audiences to consider multiple perspectives on motherhood and pose new, provisional definitions of what constitutes "a

mother" in the first place. Gaines describes the role of the mother in the Brechtian work as "a model for a certain kind of social relationship that is built around love … a position that anybody can occupy" (qtd. in Sun Kim). This is borne out in the live performance at the level of representation with each of the three artists, as well as randomly chosen members of the audience, playing the role of the mother at different points in the script, which suggests, even teaches, new audiences that the role of the mother could be filled by anyone regardless of gender, race, class, or ability (Sun Kim). Still, most stagings of Brecht's revolutionary Lehrstück cast a cisgender woman to play the titular role—beginning with Weigel's defining turn as Pelagea that very first opening night in 1932. By contrast, My Barbarian invites audience members of all backgrounds and gender identities to step onstage and embody the socially and politically engaged mother—to read Pelagea's lines and, at times, to lift her revolutionary red flag. This level of audience participation is unique to the collective's updating of Brecht and encourages a questioning of societal norms as well as individual preconceptions of motherhood—rendering the work more engaging and more radical in its evocation of contemporary American discourses around reproductive rights, social justice activism, and gender roles.

As an extratextual element to the play, the video installation serves as another visual and auditory dimension extending the themes of *The Mother*. Though less didactic, the *Universal Declaration* video explores the role of the mother as a locus for change and revolutionary action through an explicitly feminist lens. Privileging the foundational feminist notion that the personal is political and elevating the autobiographical to the status of fine art material, My Barbarian appropriates the short, episodic structure of the Lehrstück to enact what the collective refers to as a "personal and political matrilineage" starring their mothers as well as their creative mentors, the feminist artists Eleanor Antin and Mary Kelly (Vielmetter Gallery). Kelly and Antin embody icons Klein and Roosevelt, while each member's mother cocreates a brief Brechtian segment that testifies to the radical nature of their experiences with motherhood. In one segment, Jade Gordon reads aloud from her mother's private journal from 1978 while candid, contemporary black-and-white photographs of Victoria Gordon flash on the screen. Through its accentuation of one woman's diaristic account of new motherhood, My Barbarian's video work topples the conventional notion of the mother as a self-sacrificing caretaker, instead advancing a raw and unfiltered account of motherhood grounded in lived human experience.

In another segment, Alexandro Segade's mother, Irene, delivers a TED Talk–style lecture raising awareness around the threats faced by bullied LGBTQIA youth in schools and advocating for more allies in the classroom. Alexandro, in drag, stands beside her. Like Gordon's confessional diary segment, Segade's lecture segment defies popular media depictions of mothers

solely engaged in the duties of the domestic sphere. Instead, dressed in a black suit and speaking forcefully from a podium, Segade represents a powerful and public-facing figure—a mother engaged in social activism. While her advocacy for bullied LGBTQIA youth showcases maternal care and concern for marginalized communities, her lecture positions motherhood as a vehicle for political change. Through a unique formal strategy that couples personal narratives and feminist ideologies alongside epic techniques, My Barbarian's *Universal Declaration* video installation cleverly presents new perspectives on Brecht's depiction of a revolutionary mother and the play's Marxist dialectic concerning the individual and the collective.

An Epic Mother—The Wooster Group's Production of *The Mother* (2021-22)

Formed in 1975 from a splinter faction of Richard Schechner's Performance Group, The Wooster Group is an avant-garde theatre company that takes its name from the SoHo street where it works and stages productions. Led and directed by founding member Elizabeth LeCompte, the ensemble is critically vaunted for its hallmark deconstruction and reframing of canonical texts and its groundbreaking deployment of video projection within live performances. One such performance, the Obie-winning *House/Lights* from 1999, is described by intermedial scholar Ric Knowles as collaging no less than four source texts—Joseph Mawra's 1964 cult lesbian BDSM film, *Olga's House of Shame*, Gertrude Stein's 1938 "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," Mel Brooks's 1974 film, *Young Frankenstein*, and episodes of "I Love Lucy"—together with a collision of sonic forms such as, "voices filtered through sound chambers … blips, squawks, and quacks" (Knowles 190). Whatever the intertextual citation or intermedial strategy, LeCompte's stage productions, like Brecht's, have always functioned as outliers (and keen satires) of more conventional and naturalistic theatrical traditions. Indeed, the Group's stage is so frequently posited as an inheritor of Brecht's that audiences and critics alike were surprised when it was announced in 2021 that The Wooster Group, for the first time in its nearly fifty-year history, would finally stage their first Brecht play, *The Mother*, with founding member Kate Valk playing the role of Pelagea Vlassova (McNulty).

In the Group's production of Brecht's Lehrstück, the imitative and naturalistic aims of Aristotelian theatre that Brecht railed against are jettisoned in favour of the company's signature postmodern, multimodal approach to structure and temporality, pursued through the sophisticated interweaving of technology, text, and experimental performance. Whereas past performances (such as *House/Lights*) visually privileged filmic intertexts through the onstage presence of multiple competing television screens, video

monitors, or both, The Wooster Group's intermedial rendering of Brecht took a subtler and not always readily apparent turn to the acoustic environment. W. B. Worthen deciphers what he calls the "complex audio sphere" of the company's unique staging of *The Mother*—one in which the prerecorded dialogue from past rehearsals and previous productions of Brecht's play (including a filmed version of the 1958 Berliner Ensemble performance in which Helene Weigel reprises her role as Pelagea) are fed into the actors' ears by way of small but visible earbuds, which they either repeat or lipsynch while the prerecoded dialogue plays for the audience (37).

I read this strategy as exercising new and relevant applications of Brecht's epic theory, albeit through an advanced technological looping that the dramatist could not have predicted in his lifetime. At the same time, this exchange of audio playback and lipsynching is sometimes invisible to the audience. Critic Helen Shaw observed in her review that sound designer Eric Sluyter's "live-mixed audio" often "plays tricks" ("The Mother"). The moments of delay in the audio playback or an actor's halting delivery of their line do serve to distance the audience from any sympathetic overidentification with the characters while also cleverly functioning as a kind of second-hand, post-cinematic citation of the Berliner Ensemble's performance film of *The Mother*. Adelita Husni Bey argues that all of this aural disharmony can indeed be seen as "innovating on Brecht's technique … and generating greater critical distance from the original script" ("The Problem of the Missing Meat"). Worthen observes the Group's complex "interface" between the live and the mediated voices of *The Mother* "alter and amplify" for a contemporary, media-savvy audience the intended alienation of Brecht's epic theatre (131). What is the intention behind such alienation? Brecht's theory promises us that within the rift—the psychic space gifted to us by the Verfremdungseffekt—the concerns of our current historical context can be more readily confronted.

In addition to the experiments with live and recorded sound, *The Mother* also featured The Wooster Group's standard Brechtian practice of making visible to the audience the technologies of film, video, laptops, and digital art projections. In a more recent development, the company also started sharing short video documents of their quotidian practices as a theatre company—including crowdfunding appeals and archival gems—to its online vlog (known as *Dailies*). I found these short videos, which offer yet another intermedial frame through which to consider the lessons of *The Mother,* particularly meaningful during the COVID-19 confinement of 2020-2021, when attending a theatre performance could only take place through the intermediary of a flat screen. Watching The Wooster Group rehearsals for *The Mother,* or even archival clips from live performances I had attended years ago, granted me an experience of "liveness" that was impossible to attain otherwise. In a separate article on *The Mother* for *New York Magazine* in March of 2021, Shaw

contemplated what the potential impact the deaths of more than four hundred thousand older Americans during the first year of the pandemic might have on the audience reception of *The Mother* once it was safe to gather in a theatre once again: "When the group began working on it, nearly two years ago, Brecht's play might have seemed militant, a rallying cry. How will the fragile, ferocious mother at its heart appear after more than a year without contact with our parents? It might well become a memorial to the elderly we've lost—or an ode to the ones who kept going" ("Theater Is Closed"). If, as Brecht suggested, the filmic texts deployed within a live performance of Lehrstück might serve as a kind of "chorus" to encourage the involvement of the collective over that of the individual (Brecht, *Brecht on Film and Radio* 6), then perhaps The Wooster Group's *Dailies*, in some small and significant way, may also serve as a chorus to encourage a preperformance collectivity among its audiences.

In one of the promotional videos for *The Mother*, longtime company member Kate Valk says that the company was initially drawn to Brecht's story because of the central character—a sixty-year-old woman who, after many travails, achieves revolutionary consciousness. Staring directly into the camera, Valk smiles knowingly and asks: "Now who doesn't want that in their 60s?" (The Wooster Group). Elisabeth Vincintelli, in her review of the play and its various trans-medial adaptations for *The New York Times*, notes that after watching this particular clip and other behind-the-curtain videos on the *Dailies*, it became challenging to separate the character of Pelagea Vlassova from LeCompte, aged seventy-seven, and Valk, aged sixty-five—women artists "who continue to explore theatre with an energy and inquisitiveness people a third of their age might envy." I, too, found it difficult to avoid drawing the company's two influential women, the formidable lead character in *The Mother*, and even the spectral presence of the original Pelagea, Helene Weigel, into a quasi-matrilineal relationship, albeit temporarily and through the magic of the colliding media elements. Like My Barbarian's celebration of their artistic forbearers, The Wooster Group's privileging of a matrilineal connection between women artists serves as one of their most exciting feminist updates of the Brechtian motherhood project—evolving the concepts of motherhood and mentorship beyond their biologic and patriarchal origins and emphasizing shared experience and the intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge as the best instruments for social transformation.

Similar to My Barbarian's video installation, The Wooster Group's vlog can be interpreted as an extratextual iteration of the company's update of *The Mother*—another contemporary intermedial approach that I understand as an outgrowth of Brecht's epic stage. These extratextual elements do not express the same kind of visual simultaneity that, say, Piscator's onstage documentary footage might. But, in form and function, the videos on the vlog (depicting

rehearsals, translation sessions, and even the stage hands experimenting with props design and placement) still underscore the artificiality, the *constructed*-ness, of the Group stage, thereby provoking spectatorial awareness and running counter to, indeed transgressing, the hermetic and illusionistic practices of mainstream Aristotelian theatre, which, it must be said, are still alive and well and on view (almost) any night of the week in Midtown, Manhattan.

Findings and Brecht's Continued Relevance

In the closing chapter of her book-length work on estrangement in the theatre, Silvija Jestrovic notes that Brecht was not the first artist in history to "make the familiar strange" as a way of engaging audiences for art. She names Aristotle, Horace, Coleridge and Wordsworth as part of that lineage (153). She warns that the alienation effect, like all artistic theory, "is not immune to the erosion of time and to the processes of automatization that devour art's potential for newness and perceptibility" and observes that the "devices" of theatrical estrangement work best when they are culturally specific, flexible and responsive to the prevailing concerns of the time (155). Jestrovic closes with the vital question still facing all theatre and performance artists today: "In today's world, flooded with information, images, and sounds, where the distinction between real and simulated becomes increasingly blurred, how might theatre subvert the stock responses of an audience and make the well known fresh and meaningful again?" (157). In response, I would like to share a few of the key findings from my comparative analysis of the US productions of *The Mother* by My Barbarian in 2013 and The Wooster Group in 2021-22—intermedial performance works that, to my mind, succeed in making Brecht's epic strategies "fresh and meaningful" for contemporary audiences:

i. These two companies demonstrated a fearless commitment to the leftist politics inherent in Brecht's original play. In My Barbarian's adapted script, and in The Wooster Group's newly translated one, both companies retain, and indeed use visual projections and signage to stress, The Mother's original message that "communism is good for you." To a large degree, this breaks from Bradley's findings on the hesitancy of US theatre companies in the twentieth century to even utter the word "communism" on stage for fear of reprisal. It may further indicate that artists in progressive cities like Los Angeles and New York City feel encouraged enough by the populist rise of movements like Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter (not to mention the recent surge in public support for labour unions) to declare their affiliation with—or at least a passing interest in—Marxist thought.

ii. Both companies also demonstrated a prolific and sophisticated application of intermedial performance strategies. Moving well beyond Brecht's initial stage design of projected slogans on white sheets, the artists in My Barbarian and The Wooster Group deployed a diverse range of intermedial strategies, such as complex looping of live and recorded sound within a performance, ancillary video installation works, and video blogging as extensions of their larger Brechtian projects.
iii. Both productions rely on a feminist privileging of matrilineal relationships—biologic and artistic—which has the effect of exposing the limitations and failures of patriarchal systems and positing successful modes of mentorship as strategies of resistance.
iv. Finally, a comparison of the critical reception of both contemporary productions highlights the power of Brecht's 1931 Lehrstück to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to still connect with contemporary audiences for art—whether they were gathered within the white cube of the gallery or the black box of a traditional theatre. My Barbarian's Vielmetter Gallery performances garnered critical attention, earning them a spot in the prestigious 2014 Whitney Biennial. Similarly, and after many pandemic-related fits and starts, The Wooster Group's staging of The Mother ran for a total of ten weeks in New York City throughout 2022, with invitations to perform the Lehrstück in theatres in both Vienna and Los Angeles.

My comparative analysis of two recent productions of Bertolt Brecht's 1931 learning play, *The Mother*, by the American companies My Barbarian and The Wooster Group, highlights the continuing relevance of Brecht's dramatic theory to life and art in the twenty-first century. These experimental companies embraced *The Mother*'s anticapitalist, antifascist, and collectivist ethos, challenging what Bradley has documented as the historical hesitancy of American theatres in the twentieth century to address such themes. I believe this discursive and ideological shift reflects our increasingly changeful (and uncertain) sociopolitical landscape in the United States and the desire and willingness of working artists (and their audiences) to reengage with Marxist thought.

One of the aims of my study was to examine how experimental theatre companies were expanding Brecht's and Piscator's original conception of the epic stage and utilizing intermedial performance strategies to build out sophisticated, multi-perspectival stagings of both live and mediated elements. Through a thoughtful integration of these intermedial elements into their renditions of *The Mother*, both My Barbarian and The Wooster Group have effectively updated Brecht's century-old play—making its politics of estrangement "fresh" for contemporary audiences and re-presenting the figure of the

mother as a powerful, but still overlooked, agent of revolutionary thought and action.

Note

Bradley's 2006 *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage* is the first and only monograph devoted entirely to Brecht's 1931 learning play and analyzes the production's history from its origins in the Weimar Republic through Brecht's exile and the division of Germany to German reunification. Significantly for my research, Bradley's work also examines French, English, American, and Irish productions that have taken up and adapted *The Mother* as a way of addressing their own specific cultural and political contexts.

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MANJIMA TARAFDAR

Subverting "Divine" Bengali Motherhood in Rituparno Ghosh's Film *Titli* (2002)

Rituparno Ghosh is one of the most prolific filmmakers from Bengal, whose narrative depiction gained global critical acclaim in a short career span (1992–2003). Ghosh's work focuses on human interaction and relationships through the women characters and their identity formation in Bengali society. His 2002 film Titli offers a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted experiences of a mother–daughter relationship, subverting the social representation of motherhood in Bengal. This paper investigates the various dimensions of motherhood, womanhood, and identity formation depicted in the film and interprets how Ghosh's narrative sheds light on the social, emotional, and cultural aspects of this complex role—a role where mothers are not limited to caregivers and caretakers of domestic life without any identity of their own other than that of a mother, a wife, or a daughter. By analyzing the cultural symbols, dialogue, and visual motifs employed in the film, the paper explores how motherhood is constructed and perceived within the film's cultural milieu. Reading the film through motherhood and feminist scholarship helps understand the representation of the "sexual mother," juxtaposing it with the image of an ideal "goddess mother" in Bengal, India, and challenging patriarchal norms imposed on women. It explores the themes of sacrifice, self-identity, and personal agency about motherhood. Examining the conflicts and dilemmas faced by Titli's mother, Urmila, this paper unravels the complex interplay between the expectations imposed by society and individual desires and aspirations of women, both as mothers and within the dynamics of mother–daughter duos.

In "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema," feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis, while discussing Chantal Akerman's 1975 film, *Jeanne Dielman*, foregrounds how women-centric films are not about big events but small day-to-day, mundane events because it is in these moments, that resistance is provoked: "It is a woman's actions, gestures, body, and look

that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator. So that narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a 'significant event,' a socially momentous act" (159). In his 2002 film *Titli*, Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh employs such a narrative device.

Titli centres on a mother-daughter relationship, and Ghosh strategically casts a real-life mother-daughter duo. Titli (played by Konkona Sen Sharma), a teenage girl, is infatuated with a famous (fictional) film star Rohit Roy (played by Mithun Chakraborty). She tells her mother, Urmila (played by Aparna Sen), how much she would like to marry him. As the plot progresses, the audience learns that Urmila, before her marriage, had a romantic relationship with Rohit—a part of her life she had kept hidden from everyone. It surfaces, however, when Rohit comes to Darjeeling for a movie shoot, and the two accidentally meet. Ghosh explores this aspect of lovers' reunion through glances and silences, as words cannot express the relationship, pain, and love that Urmila and Rohit once had.

Focusing on the subtleties, the unspoken, and the omissions, the film diverges from Bengal's traditional portrayal of motherhood, which is often idealized as devi, the image of the Shakti goddess, the universal force, a goddess who can do no wrong. The idea of the Shakti goddess emerged in the nineteenth century during the colonial era as a revolt against British ideals. It was later moulded into a trope used in Indian cinema to portray a just, all-knowing and selfless mother. Through national aspiration, the image of the mother, or devi, and the ideology of motherhood became enormously important in the cultural life of Bengal. However, as feminist and motherhood scholar Jasodhara Bagchi asks, "Was the choice of the mother merely an accidental one? Or was there something about the culture of the Bengalis that created the requisite precondition for such a choice?" (1). In his film, Ghosh shows that a mother is not just a nurturer but a woman as well. She cannot be assigned a single role just because she has birthed a child; every other aspect of her cannot be removed because society can only categorize women under a single role at a time, such as caregiver and mother. Ghosh also significantly omits Amar (played by Deepankar Dee), Urmila's husband and Titli's father, from the screenplay for the most part and focuses on the two female characters: the mother and daughter. This is rare from a narrative perspective, especially given that Amar is the patriarchal head of the family. Ghosh highlights that the film is about the mother and the daughter and their life and relationship.

The term "mother" in the Bengali language also holds a larger-than-life value, creating an imposition of divinity and superiority that makes it restrictive even in utterance. In "Forms of Address and Terms of Reference in Bengali," linguist Sisir Kumar Das explains that in Bengali, the way to address a person is complicated, not only because of the lexical context of the language

but also because of the religious, social, and economic status of the person being addressed, especially when it comes to addressing a woman (as an unknown man or a stranger is not supposed to talk to a woman, given their domestic confinement and anonymity). The address depends on the interpersonal relationship they share, as in the socioreligious sphere, women (who are older and are mothers or have a form of a maternal relationship) hold a higher position in the Bengali Hindu community. Most women have the word "ma" added to their form of address, such as "masi-ma" for the mother's sister, "thakuma" for the father's mother, "ma Durga" for the Shakti goddess, meaning mother Durga, and so on (Das 25). The term "ma" in Bengali means "mother," and its connotative use already attaches itself with a cultural superiority, making it a word that detaches mothers from the world, stripping them of their individuality and showing them as a collective representation, causing the image of Hindu mothers in Bengal to be superior to the rest, giving them an almost unattainable or unreachable status.

Urmila, the mother in *Titli*, from the very first scene, is shown to follow the rituals of devi: worshiping, applying vermilion on her forehead and her shakha pola (red and white bangles, worn by Bengali women, mainly women of the higher caste, on the day of their marriage. Not wearing these bangles symbolizes the death of the husband or the end of the marriage, and wearing them signifies being a prosperous married woman). Following the steps of a Brahmin married woman, Ghosh situates Urmila in the trope of a Goddess mother. The film begins as the mother and daughter go to the airport to pick up Titli's father. During the journey, a car ahead breaks down, and, by pure luck, the passenger is Rohit Roy, who accepts a ride with Urmila and Titli to the airport. Titli is ecstatic as she has finally met her long-time celebrity crush, but her fantasy is soon shattered, as it becomes clear that Urmila and Rohit have a secret past. When they make a pit stop in a village, and Titli goes to buy supplies for the journey, the past relationship between Urmila and Rohit is revealed as they take a walk and reminisce.

The scenes with Rohit depict that Urmila's transgression has begun, as in most of the scenes with Rohit, Urmila is alone with him, talking or singing, or even reciting poems, for instance, in a scene, when Rohit and Urmila are alone, walking in the streets, their conversation indicates their relationship:

Rohit: What does your husband call you? Urmi?

Urmila: The way he always calls me, "Do you hear me?"

Or while they are in the pine forest of Darjeeling, Urmila starts singing a song, when Titli eavesdrops on their conversation:

Rohit: Why don't you sing?

Urmila: When shall I sing?

Rohit: What do you do throughout the day?

Urmila: Take care of the family. Morning. Afternoon. Evening. Daily, three

shifts, for the past twenty years.

The scene cuts to Titli's shocked face as the realization of her mother's past dawns upon her; Tagore's iconic song (*O' Chand,* which translates to *The Moon*) plays in the background, and we see Urmila singing it, a love song, about lovers reuniting (Tagore). The lyrics show how there is sorrow in the reunion, as in the end they would have to part ways, and only in these moments they could be free. Urmila, as we learn, has never done anything for herself. Before her marriage, she lived for her mother and father, followed their instructions, and even left the man she loved, not on her terms, but because it was what this society (her family and even the man she loved) wanted her to do. After her marriage, she moved from one city to another because of her husband's work transfer. She lived alone in the gloomy hill station, even though she did not like spending time alone and was scared, and after she had her daughter, she only lived for her husband and her daughter.

Urmila's spending time with a man (Rohit) portrays her to be a fallen woman, a sinner in the eyes of her daughter and the audience, in society. The film shows that Urmila is educated, and her husband is a liberal man, who reads *Harry Potter* and Khushwant Singh joke books. He is not a conservative orthodox patriarch, but even in such a liberal family, Urmila did not live on her terms but for the others in her life. Urmila lost her identity in her motherhood and marriage. She cannot do anything that she likes; she is denied access to the world and confined to the home, a paradox created by the ideological glorification of motherhood because all that she loves is taboo: singing, using her name, and even having a daughter have already added to her list of sins. Even the initial ritual now looks like a forced effort to establish her in the politics of identity, where she had to put the "sindoor" (vermilion) on her forehead and on the "shakha pola" to be accepted by the society, to distinguish her from an unmarried woman. Since Urmilla is a Brahmin woman, her motherhood brought a change in her sexual status. She had to be asexual, given her higher status in the social class and caste strata. Scholar Ujjayini Ray deciphers the phenomenon found in 500 BCE and is still used as an imposition to keep women within the bounds of patriarchy in the name of religion and tradition (Ray).

The distinct transition of Urmila, from wearing the adorning red to putting white flowers in her hair, marks the shift. In Hindu rituals and customs, married mothers avoid white, as it is a sign of "asubho" or unholy. It was customary that married women wear red and bright colours, and only women who were widows wore white. White is also the colour of mourning in the Hindu religion, and it is only after Rohit's entrance into her life, even if that is for a day, that she wears white, marking a subtle death of societal expectations of an ideal mother.

After Rohit's leave and their father's return, the relations between Titli and

Urmila are strained. Titli accuses Urmila of betraying her husband and of wronging him. Urmila, at first, is baffled at the accusation but understands that Titli is hurt and explains to Titli that Rohit was a part of her life, much as everything is. She is an individual who has her own story, something that may not relate to her husband or daughter. But the tension does not end in estrangement, and we see the mother and daughter working through the new uneasy territory in their relationship because both mother and daughter love the same man.

What is significant about *Titli* is that it subtly proposes the concept of the sexual mother, a stark opposition to the image of an ideal mother in Bengal, a goddess. Social conventions and representations concerning the female ideal have separated procreative sex and dharma, associated with marriage and motherhood, from individual sexual passion and lust. Society and its traditional norms, which, in most cases, benefit the patriarchy, bind women, especially mothers, within the four walls of their houses. These social conventions remove the sexual identity of a mother, showing her in the light of divinity. In *Titli*, Ghosh integrates these themes as we see the two lives of Urmila, her domestic life and role as mother and wife juxtaposed against her flirtation and carefreeness with Rohit. With him, she sings love songs and recites poetry, associated with the courting of a betrothed young couple. One fleeting moment at the scene's climax further confirms this conception.

Urmila, Titli, and Amar have returned home, and Rohit has left. Urmila comes out on the balcony when she sees that the light in Titli's room is on. She hears muffled cries and rushes to her daughter. Titli finally breaks down and accuses her of cheating on her husband. Urmila tries to explain, but Titli continues crying. As a thunderstorm rages outside, Urmila, deep in conversation with Titli, looks out the window with her shawl covering her shoulders. When her shawl slips to reveal a silk night dress cut away close to the breast, the camera moves to rest on Titli's shocked face at this exposure of her mother's sexualized body. Urmila quickly covers herself. At this moment, the two seemingly irreconcilable facets of female sexuality are united. The mother, who was established as a devi, has transitioned into a sexual being, but how could a goddess and sexual being reside within a single body? By mobilizing sexually connotative meanings associated with the silk night dress, Ghosh strategically uses Urmila's bodywork to unite sexual desire and motherhood, which serves to demythologize the idealized chaste virginal body of the all-giving mother, the body of mother India, devi Durga, and its concomitant ideal values and norms.

In the film's final sequence, we see the house help taking mail from the postman and Urmila applying vermillion on her forehead and shakha pola, as she had done earlier, but of habit. She sees the mail and asks her maid to leave each letter either in Titli's room or on her husband's table. The scene shifts,

however, as she reaches the last letter. Urmila is taken aback and slightly surprised to receive a letter addressed to her, as it might be a while since she has received a letter in her name, drawing a parallel and contrasting it to the film's initial scene when the letters arrived in her husband's and daughter's name. Even her mother had sent a letter addressed to the husband, as in Bengali society, it is through the patriarch (the eldest man of the family) that the family is known. In this later scene, Urmila receives a letter from Rohit, sharing that he is marrying a journalist. At the same time, Titli receives a magazine with a picture of Rohit on the front cover, with the caption "Bangali Babur Biye" (i.e., "The Marriage of the Bengali Gentleman"). After Titli reads the caption, she goes to her mother. Without exchanging words of comfort, they exchange the letter and the magazine, coming to terms with their own and the emotions of the other in silence. Although Urmila is wearing the same clothes and dressed in the same manner as we were first introduced to her, she now looks alive and buoyant. She no longer fits the trope of an ideal Bengali mother defined by societal laws and expectations; she has changed. In "Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal," Samita Sen describes this ideal mother as an "ethnicised image of the pure Hindu woman, the sati-lakshmi, embodying the virtues of chastity, nurture, and prosperity, became the symbol of the health of the community and the nation" (232). She continues: "From serving as metaphors of actual social evil, women came to signify social and national superiority" (Sen 232). Urmila's image of a pure Hindu woman is shattered. She is more than what the scriptures want her to be. She is not just a Brahmin mother; she is a human with desires, needs, and aspirations removed from what society assigns her to be.

Titli provokes through its mundane elements—it took just a day to shift the age-old beliefs and norms. Titli is not a unique name, nor is Urmila; they are perhaps two of the most common names in a Bengali household. It is not a coincidence that Ghosh uses these names for his main characters, as through them, Ghosh represents and signifies the families of Bengal and the women who are at the centre of the family structure. Most of them have ordinary stories, much like Titli and Urmila of Ghosh's narrative, but their voices need to be heard, as they cannot be oppressed based on patriarchal tradition. The film is not just about the daughter and her coming to terms with her adolescence or even her first heartbreak. *Titli*, which translates to "butterfly" in English, is about the transformation of a mother and her relationship with her daughter. Ghosh dismantles the hegemonic mother-daughter dyad (Dey and Das 66). By the film's end, the mother can no longer be worshiped, even her draping of red clothes can no longer be seen as that of a pure deity. It is stained. To society, she might seem like a fallen woman, but Ghosh shows her as a woman, a woman who cannot be fixed on a pedestal. She is no longer in the superior hierarchical ground; she is now in the same position as her daughter. They

exchange their loss, pain, and understanding of a modern mother-daughter relationship—an understanding of womanhood.

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The Outlawed Nipple: Breastless Parents and the Desire to Conform to Normative Motherhood

Maternal feminist theory and normative motherhood are influenced by a repronormativity that assumes all birthing people will breastfeed or chestfeed their infants. However, there is a predominant absence of a critical analysis of breast and chestfeeding from maternal theory and normative motherhood. Many new parents—for example, trans parents who have had chest masculinization surgery and parents who have had double mastectomies—do not have the privilege or ability to breast or chestfeed. For these breastless parents, the dilemma they face is intensified by normative motherhood discourses that essentialize good parenting as hetero-normative and repronormative, along with "breast is best" propaganda espousing erroneous health benefits. In this article, I argue that breastfeeding mandates are ubiquitous and misguided, in part due to an unspoken and assumed aspect of normative mothering, which has diluted the way health and perinatal care systems support breastless parents. This article centres repronormativity and transnormativity, ideologies entrenching the gender binary into its most rigid form, as intrinsic structures to normative motherhood. Understanding these concepts illustrates the harm inflicted on gender-nonconforming (or maternal nonconforming) identities embodying parenting. To combat this embodied shame and discrimination, I outline a conceptual framework for transnormative parenthood delineated by queer, intersectional, and ambivalent dictates.

> Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity or radicality)?
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> —Maggie Nelson, *Argonauts*, 15

Maternal theory exposes the social role and oppression that mothers experience based on their gender, biology, and obligatory reproductivity. It also critiques normative motherhood (parenthood), which is laden in repronormativity and assumes all birthing people will breast or chestfeed their infants. However, maternal theory lacks a critical analysis about how normative motherhood affects discourses on breast and chestfeeding. I imagine that breast and chestfeeding is absent from the critical discourse of maternal theory for a few reasons: 1) it is extremely divisive, and there is no unifying belief system; 2) everyone has an opinion about it (a strong opinion); and 3) if people were to look into the health benefits that support the "breast is best" mantra they would be disappointed. These reasons are perfectly fine; my problem is when dogma becomes policy and practice. Many new parents do not have the privilege or ability to breast or chestfeed and intensifying this inability through normative motherhood discourses of good parenting, wrapped in best health outcomes is harmful and discriminatory. In this article, I argue that breastfeeding mandates are ubiquitous, misguided, and influenced by normative mothering; these mandates have diluted the way health and perinatal care systems support breastless parents. For trans parents who have had chest masculinization surgery and parents who have had mastectomies, the inability to breast and chestfeed places these parents in precarity and excludes them from normative mothering. My research goal is to outline the conceptual framework for transnormative parenthood, delineated by queer and intersectional dictates. This would allow families and parents to locate themselves within a framework rather than be marginalized by heteronormative practices featured in normative motherhood. Furthermore, a transnormative parenting framework would assist perinatal and healthcare providers to better understand the needs and diversity of embodied parenting experiences that exist beyond the gender binary of repronormativity—from transmasculine and nonbinary to other breastless gestational bodies.

In this article, I centre repronormativity and transnormativity as intrinsic structures to normative motherhood. Understanding these concepts will illustrate the harm inflicted on gender-nonconforming identities that embody parenting. I will introduce the politics of breastfeeding and how reproductive ideologies cement the gender binary into its most rigid form. I use a series of narrative examples and qualitative studies featuring the experiences of transmasculine and nonbinary gestational and nursing parents to highlight how they negotiate their gender and parenting identities. Courtney Jung provides historical and scientific context to how breastfeeding and the "breast is best" mantra has become a political tool used in healthcare mandates, feminism, and infant feeding propaganda. Andrea O'Reilly's work on normative motherhood analyzes how the dictates of normative motherhood imply the inclusion of breastfeeding and subsequently define bad mothers

(parents) as also the breastless. The dictates comprising O'Reilly's normative motherhood framework are essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticization (487). On the other hand, Damien Riggs and colleagues have articulated how trans parents negotiate the demands of repronormativity against experiences of gender dysphoria and Carla Pfeffer has explored how queer families further negotiate access to privileged healthcare and legal systems aimed at maintaining heteronormative family making by implementing forms of queer invisibility. Beth Haines analyses the experiences of fifty trans families through an intersectional framework that considers the dynamic between one's gender and parenting identities. Kori Doty, A. J. Lowik, and Kinnon MacKinnon have each examined contemporary and historical understandings of repronormativity and transnormativity. Some trans parents will temporarily detransition to undertake gestational and nursing forms of parentage; furthermore, transmasculine parents taking on biological embodiments of parenting may enter unintentional detransitions as their parenting and gender identities conflict within repronormativity (Valdes and MacKinnon).

Next, I fold the detransitioner and the parent together through a literary example from Torrey Peters's novel *Detransition Baby*. Peters's novel speaks to how detransitioners can continue to live as queer and trans people. To believe that detransitioning is a return to normal points to an undying adherence to the gender binary that functions within transnormativity. The diversity of embodied parenthood is further reflected in Saige Whesch's first-person narrative of their journey as a nonbinary gestational and nursing parent in "Tales of My Infinite Chrysalis." Finally, this article concludes with an analysis of Trevor MacDonald et al.'s study on transmasculine individuals' experiences with lactation, chestfeeding and gender identity, which provides first-hand experiences of how twenty-two transmasculine parents negotiated their gender identities along with their parenting choices in an environment that constantly trapped them in the harmful interplay between repronormativity, transnormativity and normative motherhood.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has actively used policy to promote a mothering prototype formulated by normative motherhood narratives. In 2012, the AAP announced that breastfeeding was a "public health issue and not a lifestyle" (qtd in Jung 98); this statement repositioned breastfeeding from a "personal parental choice into a civic obligation" (99). This politicization of the mother's body is evident in breastfeeding culture and the adopted social mantra that "breast is best." According to O'Reilly, a normative mother is a woman, cisgender, hetero, and the birth mother; she stays at home to raise the children and is depoliticized (478). Here, the mother's political agency is oppressed. She is unable to contribute to the

politics dictating how she should mother, while her body and mothering methodology are simultaneously over politicized and adjudicated. This loss of maternal political agency is harmful and is evident in social norms, community support groups, and the systematic network of maternal care (Bobel 436-37). In 2010, the surgeon general published the *Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding*, which identified "environmental effects as one important reason to choose breastfeeding. Human milk is a 'renewal resource,' and breastfeeding 'reduces the carbon footprint by saving precious global recourses and energy" (qtd. in Jung 64). This conflated social responsibility implies a loss of agency over the reproductive body and requires birthing parents to breast or chestfeed not only for the potential health benefit to the infant, but also to end the climate crisis.

This call to action also situates breastmilk as a product, which can be marketed, leveraged, and manipulated: "The truth is that in the United States, breastfeeding has become much more than simply a way to feed a baby. It is a way of showing the world who you are and what you believe in" (Jung 50). In "Maternal Ambivalence," Sarah Adams describes sensations and experiences of the body when pregnant and how the temporary inhabitation of an infant inside a body can blur the physical and psychological boundaries between the mother and infant (556). She emphasizes how the blurring of boundaries between infant and mother continues through breastfeeding, as they are linked through a physiological process that emmeshes their beings into one, together producing milk (556-57). Adams's sentiments about the experience of pregnancy and breastfeeding highlight the conflation of the biologicalization of normative motherhood, emphasizing how good mothers (parents) are the biological vessels for nourishing their children. Breastfeeding is also promoted through its intrinsic health benefits for both the mother and the child, including lowering the risk of breast and ovarian cancer for the breastfeeding mother (Adams 557). Health organizations, doctors, midwives, and lactation consultants all extol the benefits of breastmilk as an extraordinary health elixir:

> Breastfeeding and breast milk are credited with reducing the risk of ear infections, gastrointestinal infections, lower respiratory tract infections, necrotizing enterocolitis, high blood pressure, obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, allergies, cancer, celiac disease, Crohn's disease, eczema, infant mortality, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Breastfed babies are also said to have higher IQs and to be more emotionally secure. (Jung 72)

This is an extensive list. There is no other product in the world with such a list of health benefits, and if there were, our immortal neoliberal capitalistic culture would find a way to extract, market, and sell it. However, this list may only represent the biopolitical mandate of normative motherhood, ensuring

that social reproduction is undertaken in a feminine, moralistic, and purist way.

In 1996, a paediatrician and professor in the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University, Dr. Michael Kramer, was the lead researcher on a clinical trial called the Promotion of Breastfeeding Intervention Trial (PROBIT). It was "the largest and most authoritative study of the effects of breastfeeding to date" (Jung 73). The PROBIT study used research subjects in Montreal, Toronto, and Belarus. In Belarus, "although most new mothers initiated breastfeeding at birth, the vast majority introduced formula soon thereafter and had stopped breastfeeding entirely by three months" (Jung 79). It is important to highlight that studies examining the benefits of breast and formula feeding will have "markedly different results in a developing country," (Jung 79) primarily when considering access to clean water and nutrition. The PROBIT participants were set up into two study groups. In the first group, mothers breastfed exclusively, and infants were kept with their mothers after birth. In the second group, infants were formula fed exclusively and were separated from their mothers after birth (Jung 80). The health outcomes for both groups were then tracked and recorded over time. My fundamental issue with this research model is how and why they chose to separate the formula-fed infants from their mothers. This narrative coincides with a layer of "breast is best": breastfed babies have a bond with their mothers and are "more emotionally secure" (Jung 72). However, I would suggest that the emotional security that infants experience is not from the breastmilk itself but from the embrace, warmth, sounds, and bond created in skin-to-skin contact—all achieved regardless if your nipple is made of skin or silicone. In the end, the PROBIT study shows that "babies breastfed for three or six months … protective effects exist only while a mother is actually breastfeeding and for about two weeks after she stops … [and] had no effect on ear infections or respiratory tract infections" (Jung 85).

In 2017 I had healed from a double mastectomy and completed chemotherapy following a breast cancer diagnosis in 2014. From the beginning of 2018 and through the nine months of my pregnancy, I would come up against the heteronormative, maternal-normative, repro-normative systems of maternity care that lean into the dictates of normative motherhood. The shame, loss, and discomfort I have with my body and the removal of my breasts was always my own to battle, now this loss was reshaped into my inability to perform as a good mother. I was a mother with no breast, no milk ducts, and only one nipple to feed my infant and this was caught with constant disapproval. A lactation consultant entered my room some hours after my daughter was born. I had rested and it was time to feed. I had many questions. I had never prepared a bottle of formula before, and I wanted to make sure I knew the correct proportions, the best temperature, how much to feed, how to hold my baby,

and how to prevent gas. I told the consultant I would not be breastfeeding. She turned and left the room, without a word.

The development of the lactation consultant as a profession is an example of the medicalization of breastfeeding and a biopolitical arm of motherhood. Breastfeeding advocacy has been around at least since the 1950s with the La Leche group, initiated by two white women breastfeeding their infants in public. The group was formed as a provocative feminist politic, reflecting the right to choose how women, mothers, (white, cis, and straight) can use their bodies and feed their children. The intrinsic white feminist politics of Le Leche group combined with years of misguided health benefit propaganda, delivered to us by healthcare professionals and packaged in normative mothering, has been harmful to mothers, women, and parents and digs into the deliverance of their maternal regret and safety. I would suggest that the breastfeeding mandate we are familiar with is compounded by the biologicalization of normative motherhood, whereby the normative mother not only has blood ties as the "cisgender birthmother as the real and authentic mother" (O'Reilly 478) but also utilizes her biology, its products, and appendages in ways that fulfill their purpose based on normative regulations. As O'Reilly has pointed out, mothers who do not fulfill the dictates of normative motherhood are "de facto bad mothers" because they are "young, queer, single, racialized, trans, or nonbinary" (478) and are therefore excluded from normative motherhood.

However, many trans and nonbinary parents, likewise bad parents, work to fulfill the dictates that comprise normative mothering. In "Normative Resistance and Inventive Pragmatism," Carla Pfeffer contextualizes "passing," or the dynamics of visibility and invisibility for queer families. For example, when a pregnant person is read as feminine and in a heteronormative partnership, they are presumptively protected by legal marriage and the biologicalization of normative motherhood (Pfeffer 591). Pfeffer notes this occurrence as a "trans loophole," whereby the invisibility of the couple's queerness and biopolitics is used as a pragmatic tool to access legal rights and privileges (and ultimately safety) (591). This social negotiation of normative mothering and the trans loophole points to the assimilative desire of trans families to be good parents based on normative outlines. Trans people can find themselves in a particularly confounding position when wanting to start a family that places their identity and desire for family in a vulnerable state of collapse due to the biological determinism and gender normativity of normative motherhood. Haines et al. outline the experiences of trans parents as they negotiate their identities and their family bonds. They illustrate the importance of an intersectional framework when "trans parents reconcile their parenting and trans identity" (239). This intersection is a complex one, as "the parenting role is … a social location of power and privilege ... [while] a transgender

identity is typically an axis of oppression" (239). The dynamic between the axis of power and privilege found in the makeup and visibility of heteronormative family making, with the axis of oppression seen in transgender identities, is a confounding intersection whereby the identity of the parent can dislodge them from the privilege of their family. Haines et al.'s article is a research study based on surveys completed by fifty families in the United States and focused on families with a parent who transitioned after having children. Transitioning parents witnessed how their transition and gender identity were impacting their family, which compounded a painstaking internalized transphobia (241). It is as if the visibility of the parent's transition and the change within the heteronormativity of the family exposed their access to invisibility and the "trans loophole." Only one parent in this research noted that they detransitioned "specifically and temporarily for the sake of their family" (241). Many trans parents will detransition to fulfill normative parenting while also experiencing dysphoria: "Trans women may choose to induce lactation ... [while] for transmasculine people, chestfeeding can often represent a delicate balance between feelings of dysphoria and the sense that chestfeeding gives purpose to the body" (Riggs et al., "Trans Parenting" 811). To this extent, what is the impact of breastfeeding mandates, which identify pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding as feminine, on transmasculine parents who detransition to breast or chestfeed an infant? In the chapter "Trans Parenting" from *Maternal Theory,* Riggs et al. outline how the history of repronormativity has marginalized trans parents.

> Historically, reproductive bodies were solely presumed to be cisgender (i.e., not transgender) women's bodies and all such women were assumed to want to be able to reproduce and would be able to reproduce. Marginalized by these assumptions are, for example, transgender men and/or nonbinary people assigned female at birth who may be gestational parents. (Riggs et al., "Trans Parenting" 807)

The exclusion of transmen from aspects of normative mothering or parenting, like essentialization and naturalization, while simultaneously fulfilling a majority of the other calls to action, dangerously marginalizes them. As Riggs et al. have indicated, pregnancy and parenting are gendered and the desire to parent is also highly linked to one's gendered identity: "All such women were assumed to want to be able to reproduce and would be able to reproduce" (807). These prevailing assumptions are wrapped within normative motherhood and are fundamental to repronormativity and transnormativity.

According to Kori Doty and A. J. Lowik, repronormativity (short for reproductive normativity)

> refers to the ways in which female assigned bodies and women's identities, in particular, are maternalized…. Like heterosexuality,

> reproduction becomes compulsory … it is the scaffolding on which other binaries of parenting and reproduction are constructed, and this scaffolding is the racist, sexist, cisheterosexist, and colonial foundation on which nations are built. (16)

Repronormativity carries with it, like normative motherhood, the assumed naturalized condition of a person assigned female to reproduce and care for that child with her body. Furthermore, a distillation of transnormativity is a "set of binary and medicalized standards against which we hold trans people accountable" (17). These standards include the enactment and visibility of trans binaries—trans women and trans men—meaning that according to transnormativity, transitioning requires someone to fully live as the "opposite" gender to which they were assigned at birth, taking on all the performative, hormonal and surgical attributes that come with a successful transition, including gendered heteronormative reproductive contributions. In "Pathologizing Trans People," MacKinnon outlines the history that has pathologized trans identity and formulated the constructs of transnormativity. He describes medicalization as an intervention to "align the body" with socially accepted norms, and pathologization as the calculation of a consistent deviation from the normative baseline (MacKinnon 78). Trans experiences are, therefore, pathologized as mental disorders "complete with biomedical treatment" (78). Individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria or gender variance are then intervened upon with technology that medicalization provides, such as hormone replacement therapies (HRT) or "gender-confirming surgeries, also termed sex reassignment surgeries (SRS)" (78). Both HRT and SRS technologies "contribute to the normalisation of nonnormative expressions of sex and gender … and render deviant bodies into a normative gender binary system" (78). An important aspect of both medicalization and pathologization of a trans identity is the mobilization of power; each contains the same goal to normalize nonnormative gender expressions, but they are expressed differently. The power of medicalization is the ability to distinguish the difference between what is considered normal (healthy) versus abnormal (sick/ill) and then develop systems and medicine to diagnose, intervene, and fix. While also privileging an expert with the power to "define trans experiences as mental illness," MacKinnon describes this as gatekeeping and as a fundamental part of the "pathologisation of trans identity" (78). Specifically, clinicians have the power to "verify, scrutinize and diagnose the authenticity of trans identities" (79), which has engrained and fortified not only the pathologization of gender variance but also its stigma. The medicalization and pathologization of trans identities have created determinants of transnormativity and further reinforced "the notion that there are only two genders" (80). It has been suggested that demedicalization could diminish the over pathologization and stigmatization of trans identities and experiences, which would first involve the removal of

diagnostic language like gender identity disorder (GID) and gender dysphoria (GI) "from psychiatric manuals" (81). Subsequently, demed-icalization has been contended as unethical due to how diagnostic language in turn leads to access to HRT and SRS, which have improved the lives of many trans people (81). On the other hand, detransitioning embodies a series of demedicalized steps; however, the dangerous assumption about detransitioners is their adherence to transnormativity, and an abandonment of their queer identity. Detransitioning is fundamentally nonlinear and ambiguous, it is intentional and unintentional, it is temporary and shifting.

In January 2023, Kinnon MacKinnon and Daniela Valdes published "Take Detransitioners Seriously" in *The Atlantic*. This article outlines how people who detransition or alter their gender transition from the bounds of transnormativity have been villainized within the communities that once supported them and are used as fodder for anti-trans platforms: "Some trans-rights advocates have likened detransitioners to the ex-gay movement or described them as anti-trans grifters. In fact, many detransitioners continue to live gender-nonconforming and queer lives" (MacKinnon and Valdes 3). This observation of detransitioners who "continue to live gender-nonconforming and queer lives" is significant because it points to the transnormativity that blinds many trans-activists and the ambiguity of detransitioning. The confusion and fear surrounding detransitioners is evident in many other detransition narratives, such as the novel *Detransition Baby* by Torrey Peters. Ames, one of the main characters, detransitions from a transwoman, taking on more male characteristics, and enters a straight-like relationship with a cisgender woman, and yet Ames continues to identify as a trans and queer person (as they always have even throughout their adolescence before transitioning). In the book, Ames is shocked when his girlfriend, Katrina, becomes pregnant—as doctors had informed him that he was sterile due to six years of estrogen injections and testosterone blockers while living as a "transsexual woman" (Peters 25). In his shock and surprise, Ames is forced to come out to Katrina as a detransitioned transwoman to explain his surprising fertility. While Katrina manages the information that her baby "daddy" was once a transwoman, she also is explicit that she does not want to be a single parent and needs Ames to commit to fatherhood; otherwise, she "would schedule an abortion" (34):

> Ames, for his part, wanted to stay with Katrina, and he could envision himself becoming a parent, but not a father. He knew, however, that Katrina didn't have the queer background to allow for that distinction, and that despite all his best intentions, she would default to the assumptions inherent in a man and a woman raising a child together. Unless he could find a way to escape the gravity of the nuclear family, no matter what he called himself, he'd end up a father. (Peters 34)

Ames must negotiate the vision of his parenthood to sustain a family with a straight cisgender woman that does not inevitably force him into heteronormative fatherhood. To do this, he decides to include his ex-partner and trans mother, Reese. Reese and Ames (Amy) were together for many years and had tried to have children in their partnership as two transwomen with no success. Ames believes that having Reese join as another mother to the baby Katrina carries will uphold and maintain his internal trans identity, the queerness he needs to parent. Reese is convinced Katrina will not agree to Ames' queer family vision, yet Reese quips, "Actually, *this,* might be the most trans way of getting me pregnant" (42). Detransitioning is not a departure from a gendered identity but rather a new expression of it. According to MacKinnon and Valdes, many trans and nonbinary community activists believe (fear) that detransitioners threaten their access to the gender care they have: "Detransition has become a political cudgel to challenge any gender care for young people" (MacKinnon and Valdes 3). They emphasize that these fears are most pronounced in detransition narratives containing sentiments of regret, which also seem to be the narratives most featured in the media (3). Detransitioners receive this backlash from the community based on a fear that to detransition is to not be trans or be queer; in some way, it invalidates a community of people. However, the constructs of these fears are not generated from detransitioners but from a history of trans identity pathologized through medicalization and political and healthcare systems, upholding the constructs that shape transnormativity.

Transnormativity includes aspects of repronormativity involving the attrition of loss, whereby the individual is willing and desires to relinquish any reproductive stakes their biology may hold. This mentality is spherically layered with repronormativity, which locates pregnancy and breastfeeding as something cisgender women do and transmen (as men) do not: "A trans woman, as a woman, it is reasoned, will/should ultimately yearn for the reproductive capacities associated with cisgender women, namely gestational motherhood; a trans man, as a man, it is reasoned, will/should ultimately reject a gestational role as demonstrative of his man-ness" (Lowik and Doty 20). There is no room here for additional visions of parenting embodiments beyond those defined within reproductive normativity. Lowik and Doty identify an essential "threat to womanhood" as "failing at motherhood" (16), and like the threat felt by trans activists from detransitioners, to not enact a gendered identity based on transnormativity, or repronormativity is to either fail at womanhood or fail at queerhood. Whesch shares their story of pregnancy, birth, and nursing in "Tales of My Infinite Chrysalis." Whesch is a nonbinary Papa Zazza (or Dad) who carried, birthed, and breastfed their infant. Throughout their perinatal care, Whesch worked to remain closeted and then later states that they got "too tired and busy to not be out" (109). For

many reasons, Whesch struggled to nurse and had to switch to formula to supplement the baby's diet. The reasoning expressed by Whesch is telling, because while the health issues that arose for them prohibited their ability to nurse, their tone is defensive to justify why they stopped breastfeeding. Their lactation issues eventually resolve, and they describe nursing as a "snuggly lactation relationship…[that] evoked something powerful and primal that predates any social constraints" (107). They felt their body, existence, and connection seep past the boundaries of their gender. Whesch reflects, "As accomplished and genderless as nursing felt, I began to wonder what a flat, sculpted chest would be like…. Producing any amount of comfort and milk directly from my chest made me proud of my mammal body" (107-08). Here, Whesch describes a fundamental aspect of the negotiation between gender identity and parenting identity: The pride they felt in the parts of their body that were purposeful and comforting were also the pieces of them that caused pain and discomfort. They also reflect on the satisfaction they felt in nursing while simultaneously envisioning a chest masculinization surgery. Here, a form of embodied parental ambivalence emerges, an evolution from maternal ambivalence, where biological capacities are divorced from gender identity—to admire and despise the body parts that nurture and torture.

In a 2016 study about transmasculine individuals' experiences with lactation, chestfeeding, and gender identity, MacDonald et al. interviewed twenty-two transmasculine parents (in North America, Europe, and Australia) about their experiences with pregnancy, birth and chestfeeding, or nursing and how they negotiated dysphoria, misgendering, and essentializations of repronormativity throughout perinatal care. The goal was to highlight how transmasculine gestational parents also need lactation support (like cis, breasted, and pregnant women) and that healthcare professionals should be equipped to provide this care as they can potentially cause the most harm. Most of the participants, seventy-three percent, chose to chestfeed: "Of 22 participants, 16 chose to chestfeed for some period of time" (MacDonald et al. 1). Similar to Whesch's story, these participants experienced an embodiment of nursing, and a distinction between gender and biology or nursing, that contradicts repronormativity and transnormativity alike: "Nine of the … participants had chest masculinization surgery before conceiving their babies," and these surgeries provided "immense relief" or dramatically lessoned experiences of gender dysphoria (4-5). In some cases, the relief that the chest masculinization surgery provided allowed two participants to find the space to even consider and choose "to become pregnant" (5). A chest masculinization surgery differs from a mastectomy; it does not remove all the mammary glands (that produce milk) to prevent the chest from looking sunken in (4). Therefore, post-top-surgery transmen who become pregnant may lactate, and chest tissue may grow back in pregnancy (6). Considering these surgical details, no study

participant indicated that a surgeon properly informed them about their mammary, lactation, or potential chest tissue regrowth. Many believed that their surgeons prescribed to a transnormative medicalization, "born in the wrong body" (5), gender identity, and therefore ignored significant healthcare needs and information their patients required. This is an example of when ideology interferes with good practice and how the pervasiveness of repro-normativity, transnormativity, and normative motherhood presides in the minds of healthcare providers, causing vast gaps in essential care. Furthermore, there is a history of trans people adhering to the mandates and policies of normative health and gender care to receive the medical attention they require without additional delays. All the study participants who had top surgery before conception did not ask their surgeons or doctors any questions about their desire to conceive or what impact the surgery would have on their ability or inability to lactate (5). The study participants who had chest masculinization surgery and who planned to chestfeed stated that the decision was simple due to the "health benefits and utility of chestfeeding," while others also echoed "bonding and attachment as reasons to chestfeed their infants" (8). Another participant described how supportive their local La Leche group was; I argue that their support rested in the participants' potential temporary femininization and their choice to chestfeed. This same participant articulated how they wanted to hold their child to their chest, offering nourishment and nurturing (8). However, as I have noted above, nourishment, nurturing, embrace, and comfort all occur regardless if you breast or chestfeed.

Furthermore, MacDonald et al. notice that as with other pregnant cisgender women, these participants experienced "pressure from healthcare, friends and family to chestfeed their infants" (8). This kind of social, parental, and embodied shame to use the body for the benefit of a newborn is misguided, as it ignites slippages into gender dysphoria and misgendering distress. One participant received advice from their lawyer, who said, "You have to breastfeed" and to make sure they did it in front of healthcare providers and social workers to maintain that the child was theirs (8-9). This participant had planned on pumping and then feeding with a bottle but had to chestfeed, forced to latch. This prescription to maintain custody through chestfeeding and to do so publicly forces people to use and display their bodies in a way that causes them deep distress. Many chestfeeding participants described a need to maintain privacy when chestfeeding to protect themselves from potential misgendering. Seven of the sixteen participants who chestfed experienced dysphoria and got through it by covering and hiding their bodies with clothing and focusing on its temporary utility (9). The researchers also noted that many "participants suggested a need for health care providers to communicate respect for different feeding choices other than chestfeeding, and that providers should neither assume a desire to chestfeed nor push for it" (11). It is

confounding that health and perinatal care providers will avoid conversations about mammary and lactation during preop chest masculinization appointments but then encourage chestfeeding when a transman conceives. It is incredibly hypocritical not to discuss the outcomes of chest masculinization surgery for trans and nonbinary people, as it presupposes transnormativity, and then to suggest chestfeeding, as it adheres to the "breast is best" mantra for infant care and repronormativity.

Parenting (mothering), pregnancy, and nursing have always been visioned within or against normative motherhood. Unless a new framework is created that includes an inclusive understanding of diverse embodiments of parenthood, these parents will continue to be outlaws of normative motherhood. In this article, I have articulated how healthcare mandates, trans care clinicians, and perinatal care providers have enforced breast or chestfeeding as the best option regardless of ability, disability, desire, gender, or choice to do so. In some cases, the mandate to conduct chestfeeding was so pronounced that outsiders felt the parent's gender identity increased their vulnerability to custodial rights; therefore, chestfeeding was used as a legal tool or "trans loophole" to access the privileged rights of those in accordance with repronormativity. While a conceptual framework based on the design of normative motherhood called transnormative parenthood may seem to adhere to additional structures of the gender binary, my goal is otherwise. As I see it now, the dictates of transnormative parenthood would include embodied ambivalence, time as it pertains to temporality, the "trans loophole," visibility and invisibility, nursing, and repronormativity encased around normative motherhood. Furthermore, for medical professionals, surgeons, clinicians, perinatal care workers to have insight into the problematics they may pose to trans, nonbinary, nonnormative, or nonconforming parenting embodiments they must be aware of: 1) the history of medicalization and the pathologization of trans identity that has led to a pervasive transnormative ideology within healthcare; 2) how pressure on diverse parenting embodiments to execute repronormativity is divisively harmful to the parents' health, and, therefore, greater understanding to the first point may mitigate perinatal and gender care health providers from this proclivity; and 3) if parents like Whesch can exist in a temporary embodied ambivalence and experience the purpose and despair of their chest for the betterment of their infant, then the community support around them must also outstretch to meet them within this ambiguity. Audre Lorde echoes an ambiguity of pain as she embodies both its visceral experience and its passing in *The Cancer Journals*: "I must let this pain flow through me and pass on. If I resist or try to stop it, it will detonate inside me, shatter me, splatter my pieces against every wall and person that I touch" (5).

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JWELLS

"I Don't Want Dirty People Holding My Kids": Analyzing White Mothers' Perpetuation of Misogynoir in *Born behind Bars* (2017)

This article examines the A&E docuseries Born behind Bars *(2017) to explore how misogynoir affects the construction of motherhood in the Leath Unit Prison Nursery Program, one of ten prison nurseries in the United States. These gender-responsive programs intervene in the epidemic of mother-child separation by allowing pregnant incarcerated mothers to live with their babies for a finite period. This article applies misogynoir as a framework to analyze white mothers' efforts to regulate Donyell, the one Black mother on the unit, whom they label lazy, dirty, and a thief. Using a standard of whiteness and a discourse of maternal criminality, white mothers position themselves as the pinnacle of motherhood despite being incarcerated and, in turn, position Donyell as deviant. Grounding white mothers' depictions of Donyell as unfit in stereotypical images pathologizing Black motherhood, this article argues that white mothers in Born behind Bars perpetuate misogynoir through language to replicate the systemic criminalization of Black motherhood and uphold patriarchal definitions of motherhood that exclude Black mothers.*

Introduction

A&E's ten-episode docuseries *Born behind Bars* (2017) offers unique access to one of ten prison nursery programs in the United States (US). *Born behind Bars* follows expectant mothers through pregnancy, delivery, and childrearing while serving sentences in the Officer Breann Leath Memorial Maternal & Child Health Unit (Leath Unit Nursery) located in Indiana Women's Prison. To live in the Leath Unit Nursery, both mothers and nannies complete an application, take part in an interview with the warden and unit staff, and meet eligibility requirements related to health, length of sentence, and conviction type. Located in a wing separate from the general prison population, the

Leath Unit Nursery provides mothers with a safe environment to interact with their babies, staff to guide them with pre and postnatal care, nannies to assist with childrearing, and necessary supplies, such as formula, clothes, and diapers. The Leath Unit Nursery serves to intervene in the US epidemic of maternal incarceration that separates mothers from their children. In 2018, the Advocacy and Research on Reproductive Wellness of Incarcerated People (ARRWIP) reported that four percent of women entering state prisons and three percent of women entering jails were pregnant. Pregnancy behind bars poses health risks to mothers and babies as correctional facilities restrict mothers' access to adequate care, shackle women during childbirth, and separate mothers from their babies shortly after delivery. Prison nurseries offer an alternative to this dehumanizing process by allowing pregnant mothers in prison to live with their babies for a finite period.

Through raw footage, direct and indirect interviews, and narrative exposition, *Born behind Bars* illustrates the realities of performing motherhood behind bars, including balancing childrearing with recovery and rehabilitation. The Leath Unit Nursery allows mothers to remain their babies' primary caretakers, but mothering within prison means mothering practices are still regulated by institutional rules and policies. For instance, mothers must receive approval from the prenatal coordinator for administering any medication to their baby; they must keep their baby's crib free of any items, including blankets, and they are not permitted to allow nannies or other mothers to watch their babies unless they are preapproved by unit staff. We bear witness to the contention this lack of agency causes when mothers are written up for sleeping with their babies instead of placing them in their cribs or for raising their voices towards or around their infants. However, tensions escalate even more when Donyell, a Black mother, is accepted into the nursery program. Donyell is introduced midway through the docuseries when the unit counsellor informs her that she has been accepted into the nursery program and will move from unit seven in the general population to unit five—the baby unit. Donyell responds with a contagious smile and attempts to help the counsellor and the nanny pack her belongings, even though she is thirty-three weeks pregnant. Shortly after Donyell arrives at the Leath Unit Nursery, her white counterparts label her lazy, dirty, and a thief. This imagined narrative demonstrates that her presence as the only Black mother in a nursery occupied by white mothers disrupts their constructed definitions of motherhood. As such, these white mothers use a discourse of maternal criminalization to depict Donyell as noncompliant with unit rules, which threatens to get her removed from the program and separated from her baby.

The white mothers' treatment of Donyell signals the work of Moya Bailey, who coined the term "misogynoir" in 2008 to "describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital

culture" (1). The concept of misogynoir is helpful when conceptualizing the white mothers' bias towards Donyell because it explains why these mothers, who are also stigmatized as bad mothers due to their incarceration, feel empowered to deny Donyell the right to motherhood. Using misogynoir as a framework to analyze the narratives white mothers construct about Donyell, this article connects white mothers' discourses of maternal criminalization to pathologies of Black motherhood. In doing so, this article argues that white mothers in *Born behind Bars* perpetuate misogynoir through language to replicate the systemic criminalization of Black motherhood and uphold patriarchal definitions of motherhood that exclude Black mothers. Identifying how white mothers use misogynoiristic images to redeem themselves as mothers and regulate a Black mother contributes to feminist scholarship tracing the use of misogynoir to justify violence against Black women.

Misogynoir

Donyell's experience in the nursery cannot be interpreted without recognizing the intersection of her race and gender. Various oppressions associated with different identities, such as race and gender, work together to produce injustice, making it necessary to situate intersectionality as a focal point, especially within the context of a prison nursery. Reducing this analysis to Donyell's gender would fail to acknowledge that white mothers target Donyell because she is Black, and solely centring Donyell's Blackness would ignore white mothers' intention to discredit Donyell as a mother. The discrimination Donyell faces is a result of her intersectional identity as a Black-incarcerated mother. By patriarchal mothering standards, incarceration is seen as a violation of a woman's gender roles, as women are supposed to be pure and obedient (Granja et al.; Marlow). This violation is exacerbated for mothers, as they are responsible for raising the nation's children and should never risk compromising their role as their children's primary caretakers. Incarceration then carries a stigma of shame for mothers, but the weight of this stigma varies. Because patriarchal notions of motherhood are predicated on whiteness, Black incarcerated mothers like Donyell are subjected to severe scrutiny for violating both gender and racial codes of motherhood.

The castigation white mothers subject Donyell to is grounded in misogynoir. Clarifying that misogynoir is not just the racism or the misogyny Black women encounter, Bailey explains, "Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (1). Misogynoir stems from and is still heavily motivated by antebellum constructions of the Black woman as "animalistic, strong, and insatiable" (Bailey 2). During slavery, according to Camille Wilson

Cooper and Shuntay Z. McCoy, whites "capitalized on the intersectionality of African American women's oppression and their racial, class-based, and gendered identities to depict them as pathological and thus justify their dominations" (49). Depictions of the Black woman as the Mammy, for instance, constructed Black women as fat, asexual bodies meant for service, whereas depictions of the Black women as the hypersexual Jezebel portrayed Black women as lascivious and immoral. These constructions of Black women were used to juxtapose them against white women, who were perceived in contrast as docile, feminine, and domestic, and justify sexual violence against Black women.

Using negative constructions of Black women to justify violence against them is what makes misogynoir dangerous. Bailey warns of misogynoiristic archetypes of Black women as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, strong Black woman, and Welfare Queen "help maintain white supremacy by offering tacit approval of the disparate treatment that Black women negotiate in society" (2). These negative perceptions of Black women have been used in policy reform, the healthcare system, and the media to portray Black women as responsible for the impoverished circumstances they occupy. Going beyond manufacturing a negative outlook of Black women, these images, Bailey explains, "materially impact the lives of Black women by justifying poor treatment throughout all areas of society and throughout US history" (2). For instance, Kimberly C. Harper declares the Welfare Queen trope was used to sterilize Black women during the 1960s by portraying Black women as having uncontrollable sexual desires that would result in multiple children the government would have to support financially. The government used this image to "force Black women who received government assistance into compulsory sterilization programs that were initially started by eugenics or using birth control like the intrauterine device (IUD), Depo-provera, or Norplant" (Harper 35).

Although misogynoir is a contemporary term, feminist scholars have documented the institutional unmothering of Black mothers, such as the selling of mothers' children during slavery, forced sterilization, and mother-child separation during incarceration (Harper; Nash; Roberts). The process of unmothering Black mothers at the peer level, however, is underexplored. The perpetuation of misogynoir through popular media, including social media, television, and movies, signals the need to investigate how these images influence peer interactions, especially among incarcerated mothers (Bailey). The first step to practicing motherhood behind bars is reconstructing one's identity as a mother (Enos). Incarcerated mothers do this by drawing from images of idealized mothers often circulated in the media (Enos; Granja et al.; Marlow). These images promote dominant ideologies of mothering, like intensive mothering, reserved for white, married, heterosexual women who

have the resources and privilege to put their children's needs above their own. In opposition, images of bad mothers are associated with Black, single, and poor matriarchs who fail to provide for their children. Applying misogynoir as a framework reveals how these images influence white mothers' understanding of motherhood.

The Unmothering of Black Mothers

Black women have historically been held to a standard of whiteness that almost guarantees them to be socially, and often legally, labelled as bad mothers. Whiteness became the pinnacle of motherhood in the early nineteenth century when white women became the cult of true womanhood and eventually motherhood. According to Harper, the qualities associated with true womanhood included "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (1). Forced to be breeders and raped for white men's sexual pleasure, enslaved Black women were unable to claim piety or purity like white women who were said to only engage in sex for reproductive purposes. Additionally, these virtues derived from white women's affordance to solely dedicate their time and efforts to raising moral children. These affordances were made possible in large part due to the domestic labour provided by enslaved Black women, which included cooking, cleaning, and wet nursing white children (Harper). This labour and chattel slavery's forced separation of enslaved mothers and children prohibited Black mothers from dedicating the same time and means to rear their children.

While Black mothers have resisted notions of deviance by either choosing not to engage in patriarchal mothering ideals or creating their mothering practices, the label of the good mother remains reserved for heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class, wed white women. Likewise, acceptable mothering practices continue to prioritize resources and activities white mothers have access to. The dominant ideology of motherhood requires mothers to serve as their children's primary caretakers, which includes nurturing them, educating them, and tending to their every need 24/7 (Hays). This idea of proper childrearing requires excessive amounts of time and money that Black women are not likely to have the leisure of offering. Black mothers are more likely than white mothers to have to work outside of the home and tend to earn lower wages than their white counterparts. Despite documented disadvantages preventing mothers from providing their children with the same care that white mothers do, the social construction of Black mothers as hypersexual, lazy, and having loose morals has "deemed them agents of their own misfortune" ("Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens" 237).

Stigmatizing Black mothers as unfit, these pathologized stereotypes have triggered public resentment towards Black mothers and regarded them as

undeserving of help. For example, Ann Cammett explains that the merging of race and welfare created "the Welfare Queen and Deadbeat Dad, the metaphorical villains of welfare programs" ("Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens" 233). Cammett goes on to say that despite most welfare recipients being white, conservative policymakers' use of this metaphorical language "served to denigrate poor parents and call into question their worthiness…" ("Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens" 239). The Welfare Queen portrays Black mothers as sexually irresponsible women who have more children than they were willing to work to financially provide for. Rather than being perceived as utilizing a system that was supposedly created to offset inequalities, Black mothers are viewed as greedy crooks who commit fraud against government agencies and in turn steal resources from the people who actually deserve them. This racialized notion that Black mothers are unworthy of assistance and care is also present in other public programming.

Comparing the crack epidemic and the opioid crisis, Bailey illustrates how white mothers using drugs are perceived as victims who need resources, whereas Black mothers are viewed as criminals who do not deserve to be mothers. Bailey explains that in the 1990s, an organization named CRACK (Children Requiring a Caring Community) responded to the crisis by offering "$200 to women of color using crack cocaine if they agreed to long-term or permanent birth control" (8). In contrast, in 2010, during the opioid crisis, white users were not criminalized nor offered sterilization as a solution. Instead, the opioid crisis was treated as a public health problem rather than an individual issue. While substance use is believed to contradict maternal roles because it prioritizes self-interest and puts children's health at risk, Black mothers receive more scrutiny because they are already assumed to be bad mothers (Garcia-Hallett and Begum). For Black mothers, substance use is conflated with child abuse, whereas for white mothers, substance use is considered a sickness impeding their ability to mother. The consequence for Black mothers' substance use is unmothering, whereas the solution for white mothers is community support. Not only are Black mothers more likely than white mothers to have children removed from their homes, but they are also charged with child abuse and neglect at higher rates and receive longer sentences (Roberts).

The phenomenon of government agencies removing children from Black and brown mothers has become so pervasive it has earned the name "Jane Crow" (Clifford and Silver-Greenberg). Stephanie Clifford and Jessica Silver-Greenberg share testimonies from Black and brown mothers describing how they were punished for mothering decisions they made due to a lack of resources, such as access to childcare and adequate food supplies. Instead of supporting these mothers with community-based services, mothers who leave their children unattended to work or use a friend's address to enroll their

children in top-performing schools, for example, are separated from their children. Dorothy Roberts supports Jane Crow testimonies with evidence showing Black children are overrepresented in the US child welfare system: "Even though they represent only 15 percent of the nation's children, black children currently compose about 30 percent of the nation's foster care population" (1484). Roberts explains that child removal in Black communities is the result of hypersurveillance motivated by narratives—that is, "the sexually licentious Jezebel, the family demolishing Matriarch, the devious Welfare Queen, the depraved pregnant crack addict"—that paint a "picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished" (1492).

Janet Garcia-Hallet and Poppy Begum note that although policymakers often circulate these narratives, it takes agents of control to enforce them. Both Roberts and Garcia-Hallet's and Begum's work demonstrates that social workers have been prominent in "reinforcing systems of social and penal control" (20). For example, Roberts reported that caseworkers "frequently described African American parents in case files with terms such as 'hostile,' 'aggressive,' 'angry,' 'loud,' 'incorrigible,' and 'cognitively delayed' without acknowledging the context or providing any justification for these labels" (1486). Garcia-Hallet and Begum attribute this compliance to social work practices being rooted in carceral logics, which according to Garcia-Hallet and Begum "idealize penal interventions to punish individuals labelled as offenders" (19). Operating under carceral logic, case workers view Black mothers as a danger to their children and undeserving of help. Fostering more than a social dislike for Black women, these stereotypes justify political violence against Black women, putting them in danger and leading to their overcriminalization. This imagining of Black mothers as a threat to public safety justifies the disproportionate rates of incarceration among Black mothers.

During incarceration, mothers continue to be surveilled and punished by other agents of control like correctional officers and fellow mothers. During visitation, correctional officers limit the amount of physical interaction mothers can have with their children and restrict their roles as mothers by acting as the authority for both them and their children. This surveillance is intensified in prison nursery programs where mothers and their children are under the constant supervision of correctional officers. In these spaces, fellow mothers also act as agents of control by criticizing each other's mothering practices or interfering with each other's mothering methods by reporting them to correctional officers (Haney). While existing research demonstrates that these sources of surveillance behind bars regulate motherhood and promote hegemonic mothering practices (Haney; JWells; Marlow; Sufrin), there has not yet been a focus on the role race plays in motivating or structuring this surveillance. In what follows, I demonstrate how white mothers use a

standard of whiteness to position themselves as mothers and Donyell as other. Through a discourse of maternal criminality, these mothers attempt to align Donyell with a criminal ethos to label her untrustworthy and unfit.

"There's a Thief on the Unit": Using a Criminal Ethos to Unmother

When asked how she feels about moving to the "baby unit," Donyell tells producers, "There was a lot of stress on me 'cause if I didn't get in this program, I didn't know, like, who, off the back, I was gonna [sic] send my baby home to. I don't have no more stress to worry about, other than being nervous about having a baby in prison" ("That B*tch Ate my Cake"). Donyell also confesses that she was scared when she found out she was pregnant because at two months old her first baby's lungs collapsed due to a lack of development. Worried the same thing would happen, Donyell was relieved when the off-site doctor declared her and her baby healthy. Shortly after arriving at the Leath Unit Nursey, Donyell is welcomed by Jeannie, another pregnant mother whom Donyell lived with on the intake unit when they entered the prison, and Maranda, one of the unit nannies. Maranda reassures Donyell that "We're gonna [sic] make you feel at home here…. And we all pretty much help each other out and, you know, for the most part, we're all cool" ("That B*tch Ate my Cake"). While Maranda offers hospitality on behalf of the unit, Donyell's presence is not well received by the other mothers.

Donyell is almost immediately othered when white mothers accuse her of being a thief. During a community meeting, the unit counsellor announces that Sydney Rose's radio is missing from her room. Reminding all residents not to leave their belongings unattended and not to take things that do not belong to them, the unit counsellor is careful not to make any accusations. In an interview with producers, however, Taylor, a mother on the unit, speculates Donyell took the radio because there are "a lot of girls over here that have lived with her over there [in the general population], and they said that she's a thief and that she's real loud and obnoxious" ("That B*tch Ate my Cake"). Other white mothers and nannies support this accusation by concluding that since nothing has gone missing until Donyell arrives at the unit, it must be her. Even though Taylor contradicts this evidence by later admitting that another mother got kicked off the unit for being a thief, the collective maintains that Donyell is the thief. The unproven consensus that Donyell stole the radio bears an uncanny resemblance to the misogynoiristic Welfare Queen narrative. Cammett declares, "In the modern era, the most stigmatizing construct of black mothering remains the "Welfare Queen…," as the trope confirms "implicit biases about black women's poor mothering, inherent sexual excesses, and overall laziness" (367). Painted as manipulators who commit welfare fraud because they are too lazy to work, the Welfare Queen trope constructs a

criminal ethos for Black mothers.

Like the Welfare Queen, Donyell is presumed a criminal based on her race, and this presumption is used to justify the accusations of theft. In the same way that politicians manufactured a framework to situate poor Black mothers as "the source of 'working' Americans' economic anxieties" in the 1980s, white mothers have framed Donyell as inherently untrustworthy and overindulgent (Cammett, "Welfare Queens Redux" 368). Interestingly, this same criminal ethos is associated with people behind bars, which should make every mother a potential suspect. Yet in an environment only occupied by individuals convicted of a crime, only Donyell is perceived as a criminal. Lindal Buchanan's The Woman/Mother continuum illustrates how white mothers can diminish Donyell's ethos as a mother while preserving their own. Borrowing Richard Weaver's notion of god and devil terms, Buchanan maintains that the mother operates as a god term connoting positive associations, including children, morality, self-sacrificing, the reproductive body, and the private sphere (8). In contrast, the woman operates as the devil term invoking negative attributes such as childlessness, materialism, the sensual/sexual body, and the public sphere (Buchanan 8). Considering how Black women have historically been juxtaposed against white women, Harper argues that the devil term woman can be synonymous with Black mothers. Since the institution of motherhood is predicated on the experiences of white women, Black mothers are automatically perceived in opposition. This dichotomy allows white mothers in *Born behind Bars* to align themselves with god terms and associate Donyell with the devil's terms, despite all of them being convicted of crimes. In collectively labelling Donyell the unit thief, mothers separate themselves from a criminal ethos and establish a hierarchy where white mothers are ethical, and Donyell is unethical.

Just as the Welfare Queen is suspected of collecting excessive amounts of funding from the government, draining taxpayers of their hard-earned money, Donyell is suspected of stealing an item that a white mother worked hard for. Validating her suspicions, Taylor reasons, "You hear a lot of stuff about people, but when you have people over here that's lived with her and seen her, you know, steal and do scandalous stuff, you know, everybody gets kind of worried" ("That B*tch Ate my Cake"). However, Jeannie, who previously lived with Donyell, says she does not think Donyell took the radio. Even after unit officers search every resident's room and cannot locate the radio, Taylor tells producers that she will be watching Donyell. The surveillance Taylor promises replicates the surveillance that neoliberalism subjects Black mothers to (Cammett, "Welfare Queens Redux"). Roberts explains that "this state intrusion is typically viewed as necessary to protect maltreated children from parental harm" (1484). Roberts goes on to clarify that "The need for this intervention is usually linked to poverty, racial injustice, and the state's

approach to caregiving," not the mothers' inability to care for their children (1484). Because the Welfare Queen trope situates Black mothers as dishonest and untrustworthy, they are perceived to be unequipped to care for their children and are consequently subject to intense surveillance and supervision from agents of control like child protective services.

Acting as an agent of control, Sydney Rose searches Donyell's room for the radio. Failing to locate the radio in Donyell's room, Sydney Rose insists she must have "sold it on the yard" ("That B*tch Ate my Cake"). Entering another resident's room is against unit rules and is punishable by a write-up. Although there is proof that Sydney Rose violated unit rules—she confesses to Jeannie—Sydney Rose's criminality is excused, unlike Donyell who is baselessly labelled a thief. Characterizing Donyell as "loud and obnoxious," albeit false, also serves to substantiate white mothers' accusations against Donyell. Through the lens of the camera, Donyell is portrayed as quiet, shy, and borderline lethargic. In one scene, Ms. Cunningham visits Donyell in her room and advises her "Don't just find yourself laying around" because Donyell spends a lot of her time sleeping. Through the lens of the white mothers, Donyell, in contrast, is simply unruly. The contradiction in representation shows that white mothers determine Donyell's character not by her behaviour but by pathologies of Black motherhood. Doing so allows them to take on the position of the state and declare Donyell a threat to the unit. Although these early allegations do not directly condemn Donyell's mothering abilities, they help to later situate her as unfit.

"You Don't Need to Be Holding Other People's Babies": Using Narratives of Neglect to Unmother

Mothers' use of whiteness as a standard is apparent in how they frame Donyell as incompetent. At thirty-eight weeks pregnant, Donyell tells unit officer Ms. John that she has not been feeling well all day. Ms. John asserts, "So why are you waiting until just now to say something about it? You can't do that. We've got to get you off this unit and make sure that you're okay" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). When Sydney Rose asks Jeannie why Donyell is going to the hospital, Jeannie recounts these events, adding, "She never acts like… like nothing's wrong. I don't know how she'll be… I mean she has all of us to help her, but…" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). Because Donyell's reaction to what Jeannie diagnosed as contractions was not suitable, Jeannie deduces that Donyell may not be able to properly care for her baby. Sydney Rose endorses this concern by affirming that Jeannie will make a good nanny because she has multiple children. Sydney Rose's reassurance that Jeannie can help Donyell because she has more children than Donyell implies that Donyell does not inherently know how to be a mother; and that Jeannie is a better

mother than Donyell. Although Jeannie is separated from all her children, her assumed mothering ability is nonetheless what Donyell is compared to.

After giving birth to baby Jamila, perceptions of Donyell escalate from incompetent to negligent. Sitting at a round table in the community area, Jeannie, Taylor, and a few other white mothers criticize Donyell's approach to motherhood. One mother alleges, "She never changes her [Jamila's] diaper," after which Taylor cosigns, "I don't want dirty people touching my kids. If you're not cleaning yourself, you don't need to be holding other people's babies" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). Taylor and Amie—a woman who applied to be a nanny—contextualize these complaints via selfie cam footage where they explain that "the one mom that's colored on the unit was having some issues with hygienic stuff" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). Rooted in the misogynoiristic image of Black women as impure, white mothers' chorus of complaints focuses on cleanliness. "Dirty" in the context of Black motherhood is synonymous with negligent, which Taylor confirms when she cautions that Donyell should not be touching other people's babies. The forced labour and rape Black women endured during slavery constructed an ethos of Black women as unclean and impious. Unable to demonstrate piety and purity, enslaved Black women could not claim to offer the same "virtues of nurture and emotional care that White women extended to their families" (Harper 5). Contemporary images like the Welfare Queen, the Matriarch, and the Teen Mom too paint Black mothers as a "stain" on society because they either cannot or choose not to provide their children with the financial, emotional, and physical resources white mothers do.

Depicted as negligent, Donyell is again positioned as a threat; in the same way, white mothers suspected she could not be trusted around their belongings, they caution that she cannot be trusted around their babies. White mothers, in contrast, are not labelled as a threat even when they are unable to meet patriarchal mothering requirements. For instance, Taylor's twins were prohibited from entering the Leath Unit Nursery due to health issues requiring frequent doctor's visits. Similarly, Jeannie's son was only on the unit a short time before he started having breathing complications, which required him to be sent back to the hospital. In both cases, guardianship of the babies was transferred over to caretakers because they needed intensive care that could not be provided by onsite medical staff. Neither of these mothers blamed themselves nor each other. Rather they blamed the Leath Unit Nursery for getting their hopes up and then denying them the opportunity to build a bond with their babies in the same way previous incarcerations robbed them from getting to know their other children. Despite being separated from their children, Taylor and Jeannie's whiteness ensures that they remain symbols of good mothering. Juxtaposed against these mothers, Donyell is subjected to maternal blame simply on account of her believed ability to pose harm to her baby and others.

Weaponizing misogynoir against Donyell, white mothers portray her as unfit for and undeserving of motherhood. After Amie clarifies that Donyell is dirty because she was not showering, Taylor insists that since Donyell does not take care of her hygiene she no longer has to clean up on the unit like "all of us white people do" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). Grounding their logic in longstanding racist stereotypes of Black people being unclean, lazy, and not smart, Taylor and Amie posture Donyell as an institutional burden the same way politicians painted Black mothers as a drain on the system (Bailey 9). Refuting accusations of favouritism, Ms. Knight, the unit prenatal care coordinator, states that other mothers' feelings that Donyell gets special treatment because she is Black are unwarranted and shares her belief that Donyell is being targeted by other mothers. Taylor and Amie, however, are adamant that they are required to do more than Donyell is. Their feelings reinforce the patriarchal notion that white mothers deserve to be mothers and that Black mothers need to earn the right to be. Garcia-Hallett and Begum explain that social constructions of motherhood expect Black mothers to fulfill "intensive mothering" practices (Hays) like white mothers but without the community-based resources to do so.

Upholding the privilege and hierarchy of patriarchal definitions of motherhood, Taylor and Amie expect Donyell to navigate motherhood without the assistance of resources, unlike white mothers who get to rely on each other and nannies. The inequity that patriarchal definitions of motherhood create makes Black mothers both hypervisible and invisible. Because misogynoir portrays Black women as deviant, they are viewed as needing to be regulated and are therefore subjected to constant surveillance and scrutiny. For that same reason, they are also viewed as undeserving of resources and ignored when needing help. Black mothers are expected to fulfill intensive mothering practices to redeem themselves, and when they fail to do so, they are blamed for their inability to properly mother rather than social inequities and systemic barriers. This failure is used to justify taking resources away from Black mothers and giving them to mothers who deserve them. By overpolicing Black mothers to criminalize their mothering practices but not using the same level of state intervention to provide them with support and resources, misogynoir rationalizes the omission of Black mothers (Bailey). Omitting Black mothers allows white mothers to maintain superiority, which is what white mothers in *Born behind Bars* aimed to do when they used a discourse of criminality to portray Donyell as an unfit mother.

Conclusion

Misogynoiristic images rooted in the legacies of slavery justify the criminalization of Black motherhood. Operating under patriarchal definitions

of motherhood, white mothers in *Born behind Bars* draw from these images to depict Donyell as lazy, dirty, and a thief to omit her from motherhood. Concerning Wilson Cooper and McCoy's call to embrace Afronormative perspectives that acknowledge Black mothers' strengths, this article concludes by acknowledging Donyell's effort to resist the aforementioned omission. Wilson Cooper and McCoy explain, "Afronormative perspectives do not exalt the value, organization and function of any ethnic group over another; hence, they do not rely on the oppositional dichotomies of good us/bad others that fuel bigotry and separatist politics" (52). When producers ask Donyell about the rumours regarding her hygiene, Donyell responds, "The drama part, I didn't hear anything about me 'cause I stay to myself, but, you know, that's just what women do. They gossip. But I'm gonna [sic] try to keep it cool and simple, you know, so I don't have to deal with those things and be one of those people that would have to lose my baby here" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). Aware that white mothers' accusations of her being a thief and not properly taking care of herself or her baby could get her removed from the unit, Donyell chooses not to engage with these mothers or their gossip. Unit officer Ms. Leath confirms that white mothers target Donyell because they feel like she is "not gonna [sic] stand up for herself" ("Mommies Can Conquer the World"). While Ms. Leath equates Donyell's unresponsiveness as "not standing up for herself," it should be interpreted as shadow boxing.

In terms of motherwork, shadowboxing refers to the practice of Black mothers simultaneously conforming to and rebelling against dominant ideologies for the betterment of themselves and their children (Wilson Cooper and McCoy). Black mothers are forced to continuously navigate the conflict between their identity and sociocultural norms. Wilson Cooper and McCoy explain that operating in this marginal space "compels them [Black women] to box in the shadows of dominant powerholders' view" (53). Shadowboxers resist attempts to regulate them and reclaim space, resources, and rights for their networks. Donyell staying to herself exemplifies shadowboxing in that her spending more alone time with her baby complies with patriarchal notions that mothers are the best caretakers for their children and should devote their undivided attention to their children. By strategically embracing the mothering ideals intended to exclude her from motherhood, Donyell aligns herself with god terms associated with mother, like protection, empathy, and self-sacrificing and resists white mothers' attempts to associate her with devil terms like immorality, hysteria, and extreme emotion (Buchanan). Framing Donyell's compliance as resistance credits her motherwork and counters white mothers' attempts to unmother her.

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BERNADINE CORTINA

Mamie Till-Mobley: Paradox and Poetics of Racialized Public Motherhood in Chinonye Chukwu's *Till* (2022)

Through an analysis of Chinonye Chukwu's 2022 film Till, this article explores how Mamie Till-Mobley's motherhood is cinematically represented. Focusing on director Chinonye Chukwu's matrifocal lens, it analyzes racialized public motherhood and its painful containment of mothers within the institution of motherhood alongside radical and life-affirming possibilities for mothering in the wake of Black maternal necropolitics. This article looks at how racialized public motherhood allows mothers to continue the work of mothering and affirming their children's humanity and the value of their lives even when all that remains of them is their dead bodies. It explores the multiple, often difficult strategies Mamie Till-Mobley employed in the fight to lovingly shape the meaning of her son's life and death that have profoundly changed the course of American history. In this way, I connect this historical example of racialized public motherhood in Mamie's practice to its contemporary, local, and intersectional implications. This article highlights the long line of Black maternal activists that have followed Mamie, as Black children are still dying from police violence and other forms of anti-Blackness, and closes with reflections on the cost to Black mothers and the tensions around Black women's subjectivity. It aims to show how continued racial violence in the United States necessarily connects the struggle of mothers across temporalities.

Of Two Mothers

As a Pinay writer and migrant from the Philippines, my initial interest in motherhood studies began with the Filipina experience. As I delved into representations of Filipina motherhood to see how motherhood is experienced by Filipina women in the diaspora or the Philippines, I remembered a documentary I had seen: PJ Raval's *Call Her Ganda*. The documentary,

released in 2018, follows three women—Nanay Julita Laude (Jennifer Laude's mother); Virgie Suarez, an activist lawyer; and Meredith Talusan, a trans journalist—trying to get justice for Jennifer Laude after she was brutally killed by US marine officer Joseph Scott Pemberton in 2014 in Olongapo, Philippines. The documentary reveals the haunting hold of neocolonial policies, such as the Visiting Forces Agreement,[1] that skew the investigation and the trial's results and unveil the case as having multiple ramifications for Jennifer, trans lives, and all the Filipino people's postcolonial precarity. Although we do not stay with Julita Laude in the documentary, which focuses more on Jennifer's trans activist afterlife and the ripples of her court case, I watched the documentary again through the lens of motherhood studies. I kept my gaze fixed upon Julita. Her maternal grief and activism drew visibility to her daughter's suffering and need for justice as well as ignited an unprecedented national and public conversation around the violence of US militarism in the Philippines.

As I began to search for articles that engaged with maternal grief and public motherhood, I was surprised to find I did not discover articles in Filipina/x/o studies but, instead, found an abundance of Black maternal scholarship. As I read article after article from Black maternal scholars, such as Erica Lawson, Jennifer Nash, Tiffany Caesar, Desireé Melonas, and Tara Jones, I was intrigued to see how all of them repeated one name as an example of Black mothers who have been public with their motherhood, grief, and activism. They all began with the same name: Mamie Till-Mobley. I was not aware at all of Mrs. Till-Mobley, which led me to the 2022 film about her—Chinonye Chukwu's *Till*. What I have since learned about Mamie Till-Mobley has changed me; her example has broader implications for understanding racialized public motherhood contemporarily.

In examining Chukwu's *Till* and its representation of Mamie Till-Mobley's mothering, I analyze how racialized public motherhood is both paradox and poetics. As Adrienne Rich reminds us in her ovarian work *Of Woman Born,* there are two meanings of motherhood: "one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13). The example of *Till*'s representation of Mamie Till-Mobley, an example of Black motherhood in 1955—and in light of the recent Black Lives Matter resurgence in 2020—reveals connections across temporalities of the violence Black lives continue to face that shape Black mothers and mothering. I also speak to how these mothers can create meaningful change in radical possibilities for mothering after the loss of a precarious life, but these possibilities can also be painfully constrained and overcome by the harmful institution of motherhood.

Being the Light: Mamie Till-Mobley's Mothering

Till is distinct in its telling of the Till family's story. As a biographical film, it is the first to be matrifocal. Director Chinonye Chukwu focuses on Mamie's experience and follows her grief, her love, and her becoming. Most media about the Till family, which Mrs. Till-Mobley was actively involved in and advocated for, has focused on telling the story of her son, Emmett Till. It was a deliberate choice then for director Chinonye Chukwu to centre Mamie in this film. Chukwu states she would not have considered doing the film unless the story focused on Mamie. During a panel with the 60th New York Film Festival in 2022, she said, "Without Mamie, the world would not know who Emmett Till was. She is the heartbeat of this story and should be centred, and Black women are so often erased from stories like this, so often erased from history, and the present and everything in-between, so that was another reason why I was so adamant about centring this incredible Black woman but humanizing her and showing her multidimensionality in all these different aspects of her life that portray her as more than just grieving mother" (Films at Lincoln Center). The film's matrifocality shows the negotiations Mamie had to make within racialized public motherhood as well as her transformations in the wake of her son's lynching. What happened to Emmett Till in the summer of 1955 is a horrific story and one that Mamie Till-Mobley wanted the world to witness and remember. In 1955, Emmett was a fourteen-year-old boy happily growing up in Chicago with his mom. Over that summer, he visited his family in Mississippi, and one day, he did not return home. On August 28, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, abducted Emmett from his family's home in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly whistling at Bryant's wife, Carolyn. His body was found in the Tallahatchie River, bearing signs of a brutal beating. One eye had been gouged out, and he had been shot in the skull. With the intent of concealing his mutilated body in the river, his murderers had tied a one-hundred-pound cotton gin fan to his neck with barbed wire (Feldstein 262). These two white men tortured and killed him as they felt compelled to punish what they saw as racial and sexual transgression.

Mamie Till-Mobley's actions in the wake of his death—to have a picture of her son's brutalized body taken and publicized and to hold an open-casket funeral for him—fundamentally galvanized and changed the trajectory of the civil rights movement. The widely publicized murder of Emmett Till is frequently cited as a moment "critical to the birth of the civil rights movement," as it sparked numerous protests across the nation, with the year ending in the onset of the Montgomery bus boycotts which would bring civil rights leaders Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. to national attention (Feldstein 265-66). Mamie, who passed away in 2003 in Chicago, would dedicate the rest of her life to educating children, telling her son's story, and continuing the fight

for civil rights and Black lives in the United States (US).

Nineteen-fifty constructions of femininity are also relevant to understanding Mamie Till-Mobley's position. The institution of motherhood was highly influenced by the sociohistorical context of the time. As the Cold War became an enormous national concern and preoccupation, motherhood became a nation-state project. Very notably, Mamie came to public attention and prominence before the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, which challenged the culture of domesticity in the 1950s. In Rosalyn Fraad Braxendall and Linda Gordon's reflection on the second wave of feminism, they say hysterical anticommunism, resulting from the Cold War and Korean War, "stigmatized nonconformity, including that related to family, sex, and gender" (28). With the nation feeling imperilled by the Soviet threat and communism, there was a hyperfocus on the family as the foundation for the nation's stability. Entrenched in that were women's domestic roles being positioned as critical to the nation's security. The nation's strategy of containing Soviet expansion could then "also apply to the containment of women's ambitions. the endorsement of female subordination, and the promotion of gender domesticity by cold war gender culture" (Braxendall and Gordon 29). The institution of motherhood was shaped by the domestic and international concerns of the time, cultivating what Betty Friedan would later name and critique as "the feminine mystique"—where social institutions and culture came together to limit women's lives (Braxendall and Gordon 29).

Mamie challenges the institution of motherhood by moving from private grief and private motherhood to public grief and public motherhood, which is both personal and political. She troubles the rigid binary separating private, emotional motherhood and public, masculine citizenship (Feldstein 288). In claiming she wants the world to bear witness to the racial hatred that took her son, inviting the world to grieve him and seek justice for Emmett, she mounts a powerful challenge to societal constructions of motherhood in the 1950s as private, pure, and apolitical. Yet as an African American woman, her racialization made her public motherhood fraught with tensions.

In the film, there is a scene where Mamie makes the difficult choice to go to Mississippi with just her father. Although concerned for her safety and aware that going with less company may add to her precarity in the South, she tells her fiancé, Gene Mobley, not to come. Pulling out a newspaper clipping from her purse, she adamantly says to him: "This is what they're writing about me down there. They're making me out to be some kind of jezebel. Two reporters have already called to ask about my ex-husbands and you. Mr. Huff was right. I'm on trial like the people who killed Bo. Jurors will be watching me and reading these stories when they decide if the people who killed my son go free. I have to protect my image if it can help get justice for Bo."

Especially with the constructions of femininity and motherhood embedding

middle-class and white values, the film speaks to how a woman of colour in the American imaginary is not seen as a fit mother. As a Black woman, a working woman in the 1950s, and a woman who has been remarried, she represents the larger reality for many women whose lives don't fit the narrow racialized, classed, and gendered ideal of "mother." The scene shows that to get justice for her son and for her voice to count, Mamie was intentionally careful about her image.

In her work with motherhood studies, Andrea O'Reilly coined the term "normative motherhood" to describe motherhood situated within the very narrow parameters of the institution of motherhood. As Emmett was being accused of transgressing racial and sexual boundaries, Mamie had to be strategic in placing herself as close as possible to the ideal of the respectable mother. As Feldstein notes, Mamie needed to confirm her role as a respectable mother "for her son to be cast as an 'innocent victim,' but she needed to do so along multiple valences: to emerge as protective to Emmett, yet not emasculating; fashionable and well-groomed, yet not ostentatious and luxury laden; hardworking, yet not ambitious; and 'universal' enough to attract the sympathy of whites without distancing herself from the black community" (270). These are contradictory and impossible standards to meet, yet Mamie must and does her best to fit into them. From her impeccable dress to the balance of her display of public emotion, the additional labour performed by Mamie to try to adhere to normative motherhood that already does not include her shows the paradox—that the public motherhood she uses to challenge the institution of racism is still mired within the institution of motherhood. Mamie does powerfully and effectively claim that racial hatred and white supremacy took the role of motherhood, so precious to the nation in the 1950s, away from her, but only as a respectable mother would she be listened to in a way that would make an impact on how her son gets some semblance of justice. As Ruth Feldstein so meaningfully notes, "Motherhood itself was a battleground on which the meaning of Till's death was fought" (265).

At the same time that Mamie is forced to negotiate the public perceptions of her as a mother for her son's sake, she also has the meaningful impact of making sure her son is not just another statistic in the tragic history of American lynchings. Even bearing the weight of the institutions of motherhood and the institution of racism that complicate and aggravate her grieving process, Mamie can articulate an example of life-affirming and life-sustaining mothering for herself and her dead son (Caesar et al. 533).

In their article "Mothering Dead Bodies: Black Maternal Necropolitics," Tiffany Caesar, Desireé Melonas, and Tara Jones use the phrase "mothering dead bodies" to signify "the mothering of Black children that transpires along multiple dimensions, scales, and temporalities" (516). It negotiates two things: the mother who must come to terms with her identity after losing her child,

especially to police violence and other forms of anti-Black violence, and the haunting reality that Black bodies, as Audre Lorde puts it, "were never meant to survive" (44). Black children are presumed "dead on arrival," as they are relegated to zones of nonbeing, to social and physical death, even before their conception (Caesar et al. 517). The racialization of motherhood changes entirely the weight of that basic execution of motherhood—to protect your child (Caesar et al. 516). The practice of mothering dead bodies is work that extends to the mother: "It is care enacted to ensure that police violence does not claim yet another victim. We posit maternal activism as a vital care work that can shrink the potential for police violence to persist in creating multiple and concentric spheres of injury" (Caesar et al. 518). How Mamie was moved to continue loving her son even after his passing shows her practice of mothering his dead body.

As a Black mother negotiating life after the death of her only child, Mamie's example emphasizes how she was able to "find new meanings in a permanently altered reality"—meanings that weakened the ecology of anti-Blackness in the US, that affirmed the humanity of her son, and that allowed her to continue to love him even after he was already gone (Lawson 713). After losing Emmett, she sees how her son's dead body continues to face violence. When Mississippi officials want to give him a rushed burial in their state, she fights to have an open-casket funeral for him in his home, in Chicago. She humanizes his memory after the media and those in the trial actively seek to dehumanize him, and having emerged from the violence of white supremacy's culture of killing, Mamie puts forward a culture of life as she develops an activist consciousness, inspired by the loss of her son.

Till significantly portrays the emergence of Mamie's activist consciousness and the place of joy and enduring love in the face of such immense loss. The film first depicts Mamie resisting further engagement with the NAACP beyond what is necessary for her son's trial. However, witnessing how the Black community in Mississippi shows up for her and Emmett undoubtedly moves her. Before the verdict is even given, Mamie has already left the court, as she realizes during the proceedings that justice for her son can never be attained with a judge and jury that do not recognize her son's humanity. She begins to do speaking engagements for the NAACP which is fighting to get a federal antilynching law passed. In the closing scene of her first speaking engagement in Harlem, New York, Mamie says, "One month ago, I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South, I said, well, that's their business—not mine. Now I know how wrong I was. The lynching of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us anywhere in the world had better be the business of us all." Her journey and the shifts in her perspective, which the film attends to and portrays, have been informed by the mothering of her son,

which both she and the Black community have done collectively.

The film ends, though, in a place of joy. When Mamie returns from that engagement to her home in Chicago, the weight of her grief and the emptiness of the home that she used to share with Emmett are present in the sorrowful music and dark, muted colours on the screen. When Mamie goes to visit Emmett's room, vibrant yellow hues return to the room he grew up in. Mamie smiles fondly as she sees her boy standing there, smiling back at her. Chukwu's decision to start and end the film in a place of joy highlights the love that endures even after unimaginable violence.

There is both loving possibility and painful containment for Mamie Till-Mobley here within racialized public motherhood, but how she navigated that with dignity, courage, and indestructible love has allowed her son to continue to be remembered today while undoubtedly changing the course of American history.

Contemporary Racial Public Motherhoods: Imperatives of Hauntings

Mamie Till-Mobley's example and experience of racialized public motherhood in 1955 are increasingly relevant and umbilically connected to the experience of mothers of colour today, who are still engaged in the fight for their children's lives and for those children lost to them from any form of state-sanctioned violence.

The Black Lives Matter movement against the racial violence disproportionately directed toward Black bodies continues to connect to Mamie's example over sixty-five years ago. Other mothers have engaged in racialized public motherhood since her example: Sybrina Fulton for her son Trayvon Martin; Melissa McKinnies for her son, Danye Jones; Yolanda McNair for her daughter Adaisha Miller; Samaria Rice for her son Tamir Rice; Lezley McSpadden for her son Michael Brown; Lucy McBath for her son Jordan Davis; and Tamika Palmer for her daughter Breonna Taylor. These are just a few names of the many mothers who have lost their children to racial violence and have turned to public motherhoods and public activism, like Mamie, to mother their children after their death.

However, examples from contemporary mothers today also reveal notable differences and unique challenges different from Mamie Till-Mobley's time. Samaria Rice, for example, spoke out against the use of her son's image without permission and how others have capitalized on her son's death: "Stop celebrity activism; stop corporate investments that support lobbyists for this norm; put an end to the political-economy's parasitism on Black death and poverty" (qtd. in Caesar et al. 531). While media today allows for the quicker dissemination of news, it also can present new challenges for mothers seeking to maintain authority over their children's legacy.

McNair has reflected on the sacrifice of using pain as a platform for change:

> The first thing that is sacrificed is privacy because all of your other children become open to the public … as well as the victims' children … your spouse as well … there is judgment on whether or not you've been a good person…. You lose your ability to be an individual, and you're judged by what other activists do or don't do…. For example, there are few mothers that are activists, and due to their inability to cope with pain they turn to alcohol … and they are drunk in public … and outsiders judge all of us based on their behavior and feel that we are all like that…. We all have our own way of handling our pain and grief…. When it comes to public scrutiny, they choose the worst" (qtd. in Caesar et al. 532).

Just as *Till* speaks to the negotiations and sacrifices Mamie made in her racialized public motherhood, this experience of sacrifice, pain, and the difficulty of being witnessed as a Black woman and as a Black mother continues to be true for the experience of mothers today.

It is also important to consider Black women's subjectivity, independent of the institution of motherhood. Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash astutely points out:

> It is still the case that black women come into focus as political subjects through maternity and through maternal practices that are intimate with loss, grief, and death. Indeed, it is crucial to continue to interrogate why black women's subjectivity is politically visible only when it stands for the loss of another, a proximity to dead or dying black—usually male—bodies. (Lawson 712)

Kimberlé Crenshaw speaks to the importance of Black women's subjectivity in her talk, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," as she considers how Black women and Black girls are also victims of racial violence. Movements like "Say Her Name" seek to draw specific visibility to Black women and Black girls who are victims of police brutality and gun violence because they are not as seen or remembered as Black men and boys whose lives have been similarly claimed. The implications of Black women's more invisible subjectivity are also ensnared within gendered economies of death that figure them too as precarious lives.

In all of this, the institution of motherhood still stands, and its demand for respectable mothers compounds and perpetuates multiple, concentric violence. The radical possibilities of mothering pressed up against the institution of motherhood's multiple constraints must be critically interrogated and examined in the ongoing fight to create a life-affirming world for all—a world seeking to mother every precious human life.

Endnote

1. The Visiting Forces Agreement is a neocolonial agreement between the Philippines and the US regarding military bases in the Philippines and the treatment of US soldiers there. After the colonization of the Philippines, the US granted formal independence to the country with conditions attached—one being that US military bases could remain in the Philippines. This particular agreement specifically outlines how the Philippines should treat US forces. They are given protections under this agreement that make it difficult to pursue justice if they commit crimes against Filipino citizens. The VFA became a large factor in the case of Jennifer Laude's death at the hands of US marine Joseph Scott Pemberton.

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ANIKA MANUEL

(In)Visible Boxes: Racialized Intersubjectivity and Transracial Mothering in Senna's *Caucasia*

Danzy Senna explores the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering in her 1998 novel Caucasia. *Transracial mothering pertains to mothers who possess a different racial identity from that of their children, most often in mixed-race families. The literature on mixed-race identity and experience is notably limited, particularly concerning motherhood in mixed-race settings. This article addresses this gap and explores racialized intersubjectivity in mother-daughter relationships by analyzing motherhood in Danzy Senna's novel Caucasia. Racialized intersubjectivity describes how racial differences affect the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, that provide a shared perception of reality between two or more persons. This paper builds upon the literature regarding the effect of race on maternal competence by looking further into racial dynamics in mixed-race families. A careful analysis of the text demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity, thus complicating their reality.*

What does it mean to mother across races? This is the central question Danzy Senna asks with her novel *Caucasia*, where she explores the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering. Transracial mothering pertains to mixed-race families in which the mother has a different racial identity from that of her children (Twine 738). In the case of *Caucasia*, the mother is white, and her daughter is mixed-race, leading the mother to mother in a transracial setting. *Caucasia*, a national bestseller published in 1998, explores themes of identity, family, and racial embodiment. In this story, Birdie and Cole are the daughters of a black father and a white mother, intellectuals and activists in the civil rights movement in 1970s Boston. One day, Cole, the darker-skinned daughter, and their Black father abandon the family to find racial paradise abroad, leaving Birdie, the lighter-skinned

daughter, with their white mother, Sandy. Believing that the FBI is after them, Sandy goes on the run with Birdie, asking her daughter to pass as white and create whole new identities that go against what Birdie has believed all her life. Birdie is thrown into a life on the run, pretending to be a white girl named Jesse Goldman.

Figure 1. Portrait of the Manuel Family

As a brown daughter of a white mother, motherhood in mixed-race families is a personal topic for me. Figure 1 shows a portrait of my family that was taken when I was roughly five or six years old. On one side of my family tree, I am the daughter of a Filipino immigrant father whose family came to the United States (US) in the 1970s to escape political persecution. I am also the daughter of a white woman whose family roots have been traced back to the landing of the Mayflower in America. I am caught in a dichotomy of being both the settlers and the displaced, being both but never only one. This is a struggle, both internal and external, as my racialized body contends with society's normative views about what a family should look like. In this, my body itself becomes a site of contradiction, an abomination to the US racial caste system that delineates between white and nonwhite. In times of struggle and worry, daughters often look to their mothers for advice. When I look at my mother, I see a fantastic, loving woman whom I have been blessed to be a part of my life, a woman who has fought to create space for me and my sibling to exist in a

binary world that does not like in-betweens. However, our mother-daughter dynamic is not as simple as those of others. There came a point when I realized that my mother and I would live fundamentally different lives in the US simply because I am a woman of colour, and she is not. My struggles are not easily relatable to her, and vice versa. At times, this division between us has felt insurmountable. Thus, this research is born of my desire to understand the mixed-race experience and how race affects the reproduction of femininity between white mothers and nonwhite daughters.

There is a deliberate thought process behind using the term "nonwhite daughters" instead of "daughters of colour." Although white and nonwhite centre whiteness, I intentionally choose to use these terms because I argue whiteness to be the main barrier between parents and children in mixed-race family contexts that have a white and a nonwhite parent. Whiteness facilitates a different dynamic between family members than mixed-race families of two minority parents. I also argue that using the term "white mothers/nonwhite daughters" emphasizes the inherent divide between them; it emphasizes what the mother is and what the daughter is not. The theory this research utilizes, specifically from Kristin Zeiler, describes a passivity imposed upon beings experiencing excorporation and bodily alienation. The term "white mothers/nonwhite daughters" implies such passivity.

This article explores the racialized intersubjectivity in mother-daughter relationships through Senna's novel. Racialized intersubjectivity describes how racial differences affect the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, that provides a shared perception of reality between two or more persons. In this case, the subjects are a white mother and a biracial daughter, and the shared perception of reality is the understanding of womanhood in the US.

Three main research questions guide the inquiry:

- How do the racial differences between whiteness and Blackness influence the intersubjectivity of Sandy and Birdie's mother-daughter relationship?
- How does Sandy mother Birdie?
- How does her method of mothering impact Birdie's understanding of her identity and place in society?

Through a careful analysis of Senna's *Caucasia*, this paper demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity, thus complicating the reality communicated between them.

The Body: Its Prescriptions and Subjectivities

Birdie's narrative begins and ends with her body, making it a core theme in the novel. *Caucasia* portrays the dichotomy of being invisible yet hypervisible and the forces of power determining which side the pendulum swings (Leverette 113). Birdie Lee, the novel's biracial protagonist, is stuck in a society that demands her to choose between her whiteness and blackness, yet both come at the cost of the other. How do our bodies shape our identities? Dominant culture tends to decide this for us, utilizing bodies as points of reference in the social hierarchy and giving meaning to them (Leverette 111). Leverett describes these socially prescribed meanings as "body fictions," which are "capable of colonizing the mind and spirit, subjecting the individual to psychological and social torment and even destruction" (123). In the novel, Birdie's identity becomes reduced solely to the racial definitions of her body; it becomes impossible to map out her identity without rooting it in her corporeality (Boudreau 60; Dagbovie 94). Her body becomes a site of conflict, used as a stage to portray the tenuousness between whiteness and Blackness (Boudreau 60). In *Caucasia*, it quickly becomes apparent that Birdie is not the sole person with the agency over her identity. Not only are people constantly telling her what she is and is not regarding her race, but her body also contends with the racial caste system embedded in American society; people like her are not supposed to exist. Many times, Birdie questions the legitimacy of her claims to Blackness; there even comes a point when her mother does not see her as Black like her sister Cole. Birdie's prescribed "body fictions" are reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's sense of his body under a colonized condition, as they both refer to the erasure of themselves by others (Dagbovie 101; Leverette 123). The conflict between her identity and her racialized body inherently affects her relationality with her mother, particularly when her mother insists that Birdie pass as white.

In this situation, Sandy compels her daughter to be racialized in a specific way through forces of interpellation because she holds authority over Birdie as her mother (Leverette 117). Yet Birdie's racial passing has a devastating effect on her self-identity. It imposes several limitations on her personhood (Boudreau 67; Dagbovie 104).

Although the mixed-race experience is not a new phenomenon, studies regarding it have been few and far between. Within the already sparse literature, there is even less research on motherhood in mixed-race families. The majority of the literature regarding *Caucasia* focuses on the themes of racialized embodiment and erasure. However, these studies do not include the mother's impact on such processes. Outside of *Caucasia*, literature regarding mixed-race experiences of motherhood demonstrates how race complicates maternal competence for white mothers of nonwhite children (Twine 730).

However, race affects mothering beyond maternal competence, fundamentally influencing mother-daughter intersubjectivities. This research contributes to this gap in the literature by studying how racialized intersubjectivity impacts the dynamics between mothers and daughters. By focusing on the representation of motherhood in Senna's novel *Caucasia* as a case study, this research seeks to better understand a mother's role in the racial fragmentation and bodily alienation of her mixed-race daughter due to their differing subjectivities.

To analyze the text, this research utilizes a three-pronged theoretical approach drawing upon the works of Kristin Zeiler and Gail Lewis and existing scholarship in feminist and motherhood studies. First, Zeiler's theory of excorporation and bodily alienation provides a useful lens to understand race and the body. In her theory, she builds upon Frantz Fanon's understanding of racialized embodiment to better understand how the systems of oppression and erasure impact and fragment the body (70). According to Zeiler, excorporation implies "an unwanted disruption of one's body—world relations where certain beliefs and norms about the subject's bodily existence that they have previously incorporated now stand forth as hindrances to their being in the world" (78). In this, an integrated aspect of one's lived body becomes a thematic object of others' attention (Zeiler 75). Fanon's experiences of excorporation were due to his skin colour; he was forced to attend to his own body because of racism. Likewise, for many people of colour in a white supremacist society, the colour of their skin acts as a hindrance to their existence in that world. Bodily alienation is the result of continuous excorporation over time (Zeiler 79). As Zeiler asserts, "If the subject continuously lives the disruptive movement that breaks the lived body apart, it means that they cannot but attend continuously to their body as an object" (80). This implies a deep loss of agency where "the self can come to experience and even identify with a passivity imposed on them by others" (Zeiler 80). One can characterize this as being outside of oneself, as being a passive passenger in one's body rather than an active driver.

Second, this research relies upon Lewis's understanding of transracial mother-daughter subjectivities. Lewis uses her own experiences of being mixed-race to discuss the "continuous birthing of racial differences and the ruptures that skin can cause between mother and daughter" (7). She describes a "profound psychic uncertainty" (2) that mixed-race children can feel with their white mothers, demonstrating how mixed-race children gain an early understanding of how race affects their subjectivities and how that complicates their shared intersubjectivity with their mother. Lewis acknowledges the power of society's construction of race over her relationship with her mother, asserting they "danced sameness and difference all the time, navigating the external and internal landscapes of racial difference" (19).

Lastly, this research pulls from the existing literature in Feminist and Motherhood Studies regarding mother-daughter relationships, the body, and imposed limitations on the feminine. This article particularly relies upon the scholarship of Susan Bordo when she describes the body as more than just a physical entity, but also a being "suffused with subjectivity" (74); how Luce Irigaray emphasizes how the rejection and exclusion of a "female imaginary certainly put women in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess" (30); and of how Adrienne Rich asserts that "under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood" (13).

Rich's concept of "courageous mothering" proves integral to this theoretical framework, positing that the most important thing a mother can do for her daughter is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities (165). This means that the mother herself works to expand the limits of her life. However, for the analysis of *Caucasia*, this research utilizes the flipside of this concept instead. If courageous mothering is expanding personhood and the sense of possibilities for the daughter, then its antithesis must be the further imposition of limits. As described by Zeiler, excorporation and body alienation constitute the limitation and fragmentation of the body. What is Sandy's role in this process as Birdie's mother? Thus, instead of looking at how Sandy is a courageous mother who expands Birdie's sense of possibility, this research analyzes how Sandy aids in fragmenting Birdie's subjectivity due to their differing racial identities and experiences.

The Consuming Nature of Race

In *Caucasia*, racial differences play a significant role in Sandy and Birdie's mother-daughter dynamic. Even before Sandy pressures Birdie to pass as white, there is a disconnect in their relationship. Racial differences lead to instances of maternal incompetence for Sandy; she does not understand how to care for her Black children. This incompetence becomes especially apparent when Cole, Birdie's sister, says, "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't" (57) after Sandy fails miserably at braiding her hair. Similar to Lewis, so much of Sandy and Birdie's relationship is "choreographed through the social and familial and psychic meanings accorded to the differences in our skin" (6). Thus, racial differences have always made their relationship distinct from other mother-daughter dynamics in monoracial families.

This strained dynamic is exacerbated when Sandy insists that Birdie passes as white. In the novel, it is implied that Sandy joined a radical leftist group engaging in some type of illegal activity. Sandy becomes increasingly paranoid that she will be caught and arrested by the FBI, and this paranoia is what

eventually leads her to go into hiding with Birdie. According to Sandy, the only way they will be able to convincingly change their identities is for Birdie to pass as white. Although Sandy technically "asks" Birdie to pass, one cannot wholly understand the situation without understanding the dynamics of power between Sandy and Birdie. As Birdie's mother, Sandy inherently holds power over her daughter. Birdie is still a young girl at the time, very much in the stage of her life when "mother knows best." Therefore, no decision can be made equally between Birdie and Sandy in this situation, particularly when Sandy frames the racial passing as necessary for their physical safety. There is also no reason for Birdie to think Sandy was ashamed of her Blackness throughout her childhood, nor any indication that Sandy will expect her to pass as white forever. In her eyes, her mother is an innocent woman caught in a bad situation. How could Birdie have said no? There is a sense of a mother's manipulation of her daughter's body, exploiting her daughter's identity for her gain.

Sandy's insistence for Birdie to pass as white for their safety centres on Birdie's racialized body as the basis of their relationship. Birdie sees how "The two bodies that had made her stand out in the crowd—made her more than just another white woman—were gone; now there were just the two of us. My body was the key to our going incognito" (142). This causes Birdie to have an increasingly difficult time separating her race and body from her relationship with her mother, which has a significant impact on her sense of self. At one point in the novel, Sandy acts as if Birdie has been white all her life. Birdie recognizes this: "My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse" (306). This erasure is also evident in a later passage when Birdie ponders her racial heritage: "As I said it, I wondered for the first time if the same was true with blackness. *Did you have to have a black mother to be really black?* There had been no black women involved in my conception. Cole's either. Maybe that made us frauds" (my emphasis, 319). These passages highlight the "vanishing" Birdie describes, the sense of never being fully whole. They also portray the extreme "psychic uncertainty," which Lewis characterizes as part of the mixed-race experience.

Although done out of concern for her and her daughter's safety, Sandy negatively affects Birdie's identity by insisting she passes as white. A central aspect of Sandy's mothering in the novel is her insistence on Birdie assuming a white identity. This ultimately leads to the fragmentation of Birdie's subjectivity and personhood. Once she assumes a new white identity, Birdie experiences excorporation regarding her race, turning into bodily alienation after years of reinforcement. Birdie describes this inner fragmentation several times, recounting events as if she were outside of herself: "*Now I felt myself*

floating, looking down at us, the three of us, almost identical in our blue jeans, polo shirts, scuffed flats, our feathered hair falling around our faces. I saw myself as I sat there kicking the dirt, trying to disappear under my overgrown bangs" (my emphasis, 275). She continues to narrate her experiences of bodily alienation in her interactions with others: "*Instead, I felt outside of myself, as if I hovered over the scene, staring down at these two bodies as their tongues darted toward, then away from, each other. I watched myself*—this stranger with the brown feathered hair, the thick meeting eyebrows, the one who no longer wore a Star of David—*and thought how impressively she kissed*" (my emphasis, 314).

These passages demonstrate how others' conflicting perceptions of Birdie's body shattered her sense of self; she no longer held agency over her identity and body but allowed others to impose their perceptions of her. Birdie's racialized excorporation translated into a sense of incompleteness for her as she saw herself as "a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion—half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not quite ready for consumption" (149). Sandy's role in Birdie's incompleteness becomes starkly apparent towards the novel's end when Birdie contemplates how she should behave in a tenuous situation: "A voice entered my head, a voice of doubt, and I cursed it, knowing it was my mother. *Do you trust Dot with your secrets? Is she above the law, below the law, willing to go against the law and bring you into her home? Because you are against the law, Birdie Lee. Your body is a federal offence. Do you trust her with your secrets?*" (337). The limitations Sandy enforced on Birdie for years have become ingrained into Birdie's consciousness, impacting how she sees and navigates the world around her. This excerpt demonstrates Birdie's internal fear and insecurity that affects her relationships with others. The limits ingrained in Birdie's consciousness cause her to even doubt her relationship with other family members. Dot is her paternal aunt who has always cared for her, yet she remains uncertain whether to trust her or not. Sandy's form of mothering was simultaneously detrimental to her relationship with Birdie, Birdie's relationship with family and friends, and Birdie's relationship with herself, causing lasting damage to her daughter's personhood.

Conclusion

Caucasia demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity which, in turn, impacts the reality being communicated between them. The racialized intersubjectivity results in a disconnect between Sandy and Birdie as the reality the mother communicates does not match the daughter's lived experience as a biracial Black woman. Sandy's insistence on her daughter's racial passing implies a lack of understanding regarding the centrality of race in Birdie's identity and worldview.

She never knew the agony Birdie felt being both Black and white in a Black or white society because Sandy herself never experienced life from the blurry, grey area of society that Birdie inhabits. Simply, Sandy did not understand Birdie because she never had to live a day in her daughter's shoes. Therefore, Sandy communicated the only reality she knew through her actions—that of a white woman in the US. It becomes evident how Sandy's mothering acts as the opposite of Rich's "courageous mothering"; Sandy's willful ignorance of how race affects their reality works to further fragment Birdie's personhood. Her mothering eventually leads to the estrangement of their relationship as Birdie runs away from her at the end of the novel.

Senna's novel portrays the complexities of the mixed-race experience, for daughters and mothers. She challenges the myth of natural maternal instinct by showing how race impacts not only maternal competence but also mother-daughter intersubjectivities. Although *Caucasia* demonstrates what happens when racial dynamics are ignored, the novel still invites readers to imagine the inverse. What would affirmative, courageous mothering look like in Sandy and Birdie's situation? How can white mothers navigate the landscapes of internal and external racism to better understand and support their nonwhite daughters? Perhaps, building an imaginary for mixed-race children of white mothers is the first step in creating a world where racialized intersubjectivity enriches relationships rather than divides them.

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Muslim Motherhood

This article explores the complexities and intersections of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that shape Muslim motherhood and the resiliency of Muslim mothers while raising children in North America. I argue that Muslim mothers are marginalized in an intersectional manner. As Muslims, they are religious minority group members in the West, and the majority are members of racialized minority groups of colour. The concept of "killjoy" is explored as a means of representing the heaviness of maternal guilt felt by Muslim mothers raising resilient children in the West. I share my mothering journey and new perspectives on being a killjoy.

The National Poll on Children's Health ("Mom Shaming or Constructive Criticism", 2017) highlights that six in ten mothers have been criticized about how they parent their young children in Michigan (US). Racialized mothers are criticized more than white, privileged, middle-class, and heterosexual mothers (Aanerud). This article argues that Muslim mothers experience more surveillance and judgment than white mothers because Muslim motherhood is a multifaceted realm of a unique struggle. The intersections between religion, culture, and ethnicity not only portray the oppressive and unrealistic expectations imposed on Muslim mothers but also highlight the resilient forms of resistance that Muslim mothers employ (Abuzahra). The article seeks to clarify the complexities and intersections of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors shaping Muslim motherhood and the resiliency of Muslim mothers while raising children in North America. In exploring the Islamic teachings of motherhood and cultural expectations of mothering, this article discusses the Qur'anic example of breastfeeding. Islam gives rights that empower Muslim mothers; however, cultural expectations make Muslim mothers vulnerable (Ahmed and Gorey). The article examines the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of Muslim motherhood by exploring the concept of the "killjoy" (Ahmed S), the heaviness of maternal guilt, and how Muslim

mothers grapple with societal expectations while motivated to raise resilient children in North America.

Muslim mothers can be in triple-quadruple jeopardy of experiencing societal backlash and criticism in comparison to mothers in general. Their intersecting identities include several prevalently oppressed groups. As women, they remain marginalized; as Muslims, they are religious minority group members in the West, and the majority are members of racialized minority groups of colour, so they face cultural oppression (Ahmed and Gorey). Muslim mothering aligns with matricentric feminism in that mothering matters to mothers' lives. For Muslim mothers, mothering is a "significant, if not a defining dimension of their lives" (O'Reilly, "Matricentric Feminism" 14).

Muslim mothers face many intersecting barriers while raising their children in North America. Because Muslim society does not differentiate between religion and culture, Muslim mothers have to bear the consequences both culturally and religiously. Muslim mothers have societal and religious pressure to ensure their children have a solid understanding of the religion Islam; they must balance Islamic values and cultural traditions. Moreover, Muslim mothers who wear the hijab may be targeted, as they are easily identifiable (Litchmore and Safdar). Muslim mothers have to perform normative motherhood, which is oppressive because it is a social construction of motherhood that regulates mothers on how they mother. O'Reilly has introduced ten standards of normative motherhood: "essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). These are considered the normative traits of good mothers, and mothers who do not achieve any of these can never be considered good. This default parameter of motherhood not only excludes all the mothers who are young, queer, single, racialized, trans, and nonbinary but also labels them bad mothers.

When Muslim mothers perform their normative mothering act, they also cannot achieve the good mother trophy regardless of their efforts to raise their children according to their religious teachings, such as reading every label to avoid pork or gelatine or finding time to answer the racist questions asked by their children's classmates about why their mothers cover themselves.

O'Reilly defines the normative construct of good mothers as nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless. In this normative construct, mothers always put the needs of their children before their own and are available to them whenever needed. And if the mothers intend to work outside the home, their children rather than their employment should be at the centre of their lives. Mothers are ashamed not to love their children every minute, a requirement of normative motherhood. Sharon Hays's philosophy of intensive mothering "advise[s] mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy

and money in raising children" (8). However, as Hays continues, "In a society where over half of all mothers with young children are now working outside the home, one might wonder why our culture pressures women to dedicate so much of themselves to child rearing" (x). These two contradictory expectations—raising children and working outside the home—are perfect interpretations of marginalized mothering in North America. These mothers do their best to provide their children with the time, effort, and resources they need. Like many cultures, the South Asian culture (my culture), however, expects them to be stay-at-home mothers who should not go out and work or go to school and should instead remain dependent on their husbands. No wonder mothers say, "I love my children, but I hate motherhood."

O'Reilly argues that "Motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism" ("Matricentric Feminism" 13). When feminists talk about the intersectionality and forms of oppression based on gender, religion, and authenticity, they ignore women's identity as mothers. Patriarchy oppresses women in general; however, mothers' experiences add overwhelming barriers due to this identity as just being a mother. Cultural portrayal and expectations of Muslim motherhood are oppressive. However, the experiences and expectations of Muslim mothers vary widely depending on cultural, social, and individual factors. Some may follow traditional gender roles and expectations, but many others actively challenge and redefine those roles, seeking to balance their faith with their personal and family goals. The cultural expectations for Muslim mothers may be seen as oppressive in one context and could be empowering in another. Normative ideas about Muslim mothering are often perpetuated by Muslim sheikhs (preachers) and because the majority of sheikhs are men, it is highly dominated by male vision of motherhood responsibilities. Researchers and academics often fail to distinguish between culture, religion, and oppression and mix cultural norms and religion as one (Esposito and Kalin). I distinguish between the religious concept of Islamic motherhood and cultural norms of Muslim motherhood because it is crucial to see Muslim normative mothering as oppressive.

Nursing Mothers in Islam

Breastfeeding in Islam is an example of the added barriers Muslim mothers face. Some controversial issues on breastfeeding arise because many cultural practices become confused with religious ones. Although Islam encourages mothers to breastfeed their children, and being breastfed is outlined as one of the child's rights, it also explains that it is the responsibility of both parents (not only mothers). Following the teachings of the Quran, Muslim mothers often breastfeed their babies until the age of two lunar years, approximately twenty-two days before the child's second birthday. In Quran (The holy book

for Muslims), Allah says in Surah al-Baqarah that "The mothers shall give suck to their children for two whole years, [that is] for those [parents] who desire to complete the term of suckling, but the father of the child shall bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing on a reasonable basis" (2:233). If the couple gets separated and the wife asks her husband for payment for breastfeeding her children, then he must pay her. In Quran, Allah says in al-Talaaq that "Then if they give suck to the children for you, give them their due payment" (65:6). The father must find an alternative milk source and pay compensation if the baby's mother does not breastfeed. If the father dies during the nursing period, the maintenance cost of the baby should be borne by his heirs (usually the baby's paternal grandfather).

Although the father's roles are clearly outlined in the Quran, in many Muslim cultures, the father does not follow the teachings or get involved. Huda argues that breastfeeding is recommended in Islam if the mother is able, and her hardship is acknowledged and appreciated. The Qur'an says, "His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him in hardship" (46:15). If the mother cannot breastfeed the child for any reason, the Quran orders the father to find a wet nurse or fostermother: "And if you decide on a foster-mother for your offspring, there is no blame on you, provided you pay [the fostermother] what you offered, on equitable terms" (2:233). Thus, in terms of a nursing mother's rights and responsibilities, there is no sign of oppression. However, the cultural and societal expectations of Muslim nursing mothers are to nurse the child no matter what, stay at home, and leave the workforce (regardless of their socioeconomic status). If mothers want to pursue a career, they should pause their studies because their children need them. If Muslim mothers choose to feed their babies formula and send their children to daycare, they are called out because the belief is that only mothers know what their children need. Muslim mothers have to perform normative mothering regardless of the rights given to them by their religion.

Both O'Reilly's list of normative mothering traits, including "biological-ization, in its emphasis on blood ties, positions the cisgender birthmother as the 'real' and authentic mother" and "expertization and intensification of motherhood—particularly as they are conveyed in what Sharon Hays has termed "intensive mothering" and what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call 'the new momism'—cause childrearing to be all consuming and expert driven" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). Muslim cultural expectations of good mothers are that they should be the primary caregivers of their children. In most cases, they have to take on the responsibilities of caregiving not only to their children but to the extended families as well because, in many cultures, their parents-in-law and their dependent children (sister-in-law, brother-in-law) live in the same household.

Other Intersecting Barriers

Muslim mothers face more barriers if they are immigrant mothers. The birth countries of these mothers might have some privileges, such as family, friends, peers, and other relatives (grandparents of children) because the nuclear family does not exist in many Muslim cultures. They might also benefit from the traditions of the male as breadwinners and women as stay-at-home mothers. However, when they migrate to North America or European countries, raising children becomes complex. They not only have to achieve socially constructed traits of being good mothers but are also expected to help their husbands because they cannot bear the expense of having a good life for children alone, so now women suffer the negative consequences of capitalism. Mothers must also perform reproductive labour, such as domestic work, childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other duties.

Amina Wadud argues that because mothering is assumed a natural trait in Muslim communities, many mothers report that their suffering is often ignored, which makes them invisible. Muslim mothers' status as invisible is not discussed here to gain pity or sympathy for mothers but to emphasize the privilege that Muslim men hold as breadwinners. It gets more complicated for Muslim mothers because Muslim men are not expected to wear any significant attire, but the hijab (headscarves), which is easily identifiable, makes Muslim women targets for racism. In addition, Muslim culture enforces that mothering is an inherent trait of all women. O'Reilly argues that "naturalization assumes that maternity is natural to women—that is, all women naturally know how to mother—and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). Motherhood in Muslim communities is also seen as natural to women and assumes that all women want to be mothers.

Muslim cultural norms create expectations and naturalize forms of unpaid labour and then encourage women to accept them, such as taking care of in-laws or extended family members (though Islam does not encourage that). Added layers for Muslim mothers raising their children in North America would be that they are expected to raise them according to the teachings of Islam. Oh (2009) explains that in Islam, a Muslim mother's responsibility is to educate her children on faithfulness and instill Islamic values and good behavioural and moral values. If their children do not fulfill the requirements, Muslim mothers who did not send their children to Islamic schools (regardless of how expensive that is) and who cared about their career or education may be blamed more than their kids. I would argue that oppression is imposed on Muslim women by cultural norms and expectations, not by religion.

My Muslim Mothering Struggles

Although both parents are important in Islam and are given great responsibilities, mothers are given a special place in Islam. They are expected to raise their children in a righteous way (Akin). The Prophet (ﷺ peace be upon him)'s hadith on mothers says the following: "Be good to your mother, Paradise under her feet." I am not competent to write a religious text on motherhood, gender, and Islam. What I am qualified to do is to write about my own experience. O'Reilly explains that "essentialization positions maternity as the basis of female identity" ("Normative Motherhood" 494). My identity as a mother allowed me to fulfill my goal of being a heterosexual woman, and I was proud of it, but giving birth was not easy. Society creates the boundaries of the bodies as male and female. I was placed within a gender binary that defines me as female, which I grew up with happily. I was given a good education and a comfortable lifestyle, as my father was a professor in Pakistan. He taught me to perform my role in society as a good daughter, Muslim, and person.

My upbringing teaches me that by being a heterosexual person, I have to produce babies because society expects me, as a woman, to be a good mother. When I arrived in Canada, I found another Pakistani community with which I thought I would be comfortable interacting, but I was not able to get any support from the community. I was a stranger in a completely different world, struggling with employment, racism, and Islamophobia. I was alone with my four-year-old daughter, struggling and trying to learn about my new country, its society, its norms, and the language. My life was consumed by work, and my daughter spent her life in daycare.

My faith in Islam and my cultural identity as Pakistani became entangled, violating my basic rights and preventing me from living a normal life. Having babies was part of my role as a heterosexual woman. I did not know my pregnancy could be that difficult, and I had morning sickness for all nine months. I was not able to cook because the smell of food made me nauseous, and I could not afford to eat at restaurants, nor did I have anybody who could cook for me. Thus, I survived only on liquid food. I was the only caregiver for my child, and I needed paid work while performing my role as a mother. I kept working for my survival.

While working, I had to practise being a Muslim mother. I never thought that there would come a day when I would have to look at labels on food or ask for the ingredients at a restaurant, or regularly check my children's school lunch menu to see if it was halal. Likewise, I never assumed that explaining to my daughter why I wore a Hijab would be this difficult when she shared that she was teased and laughed at for her mother wearing a skirt or shirt on her head. I never assumed that after 9/11 happened, I would have to tell my

daughter to hide her identity as a Muslim in her new school. While telling her the story of why I stopped wearing the hijab, I encouraged her to introduce herself as "Faith" (the English word for the name "Imaan") because I was worried for her safety in school. An unattainable ideal of a good and ideal Muslim mother was exhausting because I had to keep the balance of good motherhood as well as practise Islamic rituals of motherhood. I had to become a role model—five times praying and reciting the Quran—so my daughter could follow me. As it says in our tradition, "A mother's lap is the first school."

My Maternal Regret and Guilt

The role of a mother is both challenging and rewarding, and when it is woven into the fabric of Muslim identity, it takes on a unique tone. Maternal regrets are taboo in Muslim cultures. O'Reilly defines motherhood as the following: "The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institute of motherhood which is male defined and controlled and is equally oppressive to the women" ("Maternal Regret" 586). I found motherhood oppressive in many ways. The journey of Muslim motherhood often begins masked by cultural expectations and societal norms. From the moment a woman becomes a mother, she is confronted with the obligations of perfection. In short, motherhood is an institute dictating how one behaves and responds according to the social construction. However, mothering is a unique experience. Unattainable versions of motherhood are oppressive, dictating how mothers are to live their lives. They not only must feel unconditional love for their children, but they should also exhibit that to the world as well. Mothers are expected to put their self, their pain, and their needs on the side. They are also expected to deny their emotional realities.

I experienced maternal regret and guilt in my journey as a mother, starting with delivery, particularly with my son. Mothers experience many difficulties in their mothering roles, including difficulty in delivering the baby, breastfeeding that baby, and entering unpaid motherhood work where the job is 24/7 with no vacation. My baby grew big, about twelve pounds in my womb, and I did not have a husband with me at that time. I had no other adult to help make decisions on my behalf. I wanted a female gynecologist, but she was not available when I was in labour. When it was time, I was induced by the nurses while the doctor was on her way. I had a difficult delivery, and when my baby came into this world, I was exhausted. When the nurse put my child close to my face, the smell of blood and my feelings of exhaustion were overwhelming. I asked the nurse to please take him away, and the doctor had a look of disappointment. Susan Maushart has exposed the romantic myths of motherhood, about the realities of childbirth that can be unbearably painful, full of gore and contain "volcanic eruptions" (297). When I came back to my

senses, the baby was cleaned up. I showed my love. I showed more love and compassion than I felt because I was afraid they might call the Children's Aid Society, assuming that I was not a good mother. This guilt followed me for years. I was so embarrassed that I never shared this with anyone. I watched many YouTube videos to prepare myself for delivery. In the videos, every mother showed love and compassion to her newborn, but I did not, and that feeling of guilt followed me.

Maushart also deconstructs the "breast is best" myth because the nipples, the breast, can hurt when mothers decide to breastfeed. Sometimes there is not enough milk for the baby, and they chew on the nipple as if they are chewing gum. I was frustrated after giving birth. My back hurt. My neck hurt. I never got enough sleep. The baby always cried, and I felt half-insane. But I did love my son. Looking at him while he was sleeping peacefully, smiling sometimes in his dreams made me smile, and I felt so proud of my creation and decision to be a mother. However, the frustration of exhaustion was there. But I masked my feelings. By hiding the exhaustion and following the dictates of normative motherhood, I wore the mask, where I always showed how satisfied and available I was for motherhood.

Maushart confronts the cultural construction of motherhood, as it "glorifies the ideal of motherhood but takes for granted the work of motherhood and ignores the experience of motherhood" (280). The cultural expectations of motherhood in Muslim families are oppressive. Having grown up in a Muslim patriarchal society, I was taught one thing clearly—that I have to be a brave mother who will protect her children no matter how old they are. This kind of mothering was modelled by my mother. I was given examples of helpless birds who make a nest and save their children, feed them, and take care of them (although the part was exempt from the story when the mother bird forcefully kicks the babies out because she wants them to fly). My cultural belief was that the mother is responsible for everything that her children do, and it was considered normal. When a woman becomes a mother, her whole life is transformed in terms of relationships, professional identity, and her sense of self. She puts on a show of normative or intensive motherhood, which she keeps pretending to be successful at but constantly struggles to fulfill the never-ending demands of motherhood.

My Journey as a Killjoy and an Empowered Mother

Maushart argues that "social masks are an indispensable accessory in our emotional wardrobe" (279). She calls a motherhood mask "an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all-knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience" (586). The mask of motherhood becomes an attempt to appear in control. The juggling act of working mothers

becomes a never-ending road of frustration and weariness, and these mothers end up feeling overwhelmed and even facing mental health challenges. The motherhood mask oppresses women; they deny their true feelings under the pressure of normative motherhood and mask their struggles and challenges under the notion of being good mothers. As a racialized Muslim mother in North America, I had to live a life that was full of struggle. I had to resist classism and racism in every aspect of my life, and I had to put on a mask of an empowered mother not because I had much of a choice. I was not brave, but I always wore the mask of a nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless mother.

O'Reilly stresses the importance of giving voice to maternal regrets because openly being a regretful mother speaks to patriarchal power and social construction in a way that shows the mother's agency. Voicing their experiences with their style of motherhood allows mothers to not only showcase empowering mothering as a counternarrative but also to resist and reform patriarchal, socially constructed motherhood. The empowered mothering narrative shifts the power from institutional motherhood to mothers themselves. I believe that motherhood is culturally woven into normative motherhood norms. My culture believes that all women are born to become mothers. Before I became a mother, I was labelled as damaged and incomplete; I was told to actively find a cure for my "disease" of not having a child. So, when I had children, society assured my completeness. The feeling faded quickly when I had to perform many roles and had to wear the motherhood mask to hide the pain and struggles of mothering. Maternal regrets never fade, even after transitioning into motherhood. This assumption denies the severity of the issue because these regrets never get addressed, as it is assumed they are fixed over time.

To be masked, Maushart continues, is "to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves" (270). Like many other mothers, I hate the mother role and its expectations, but I do love my children. O'Reilly argues that maternal regret plays an essential role in establishing mothering. I realize that validating my motherhood experiences is important because I will remain a mother even if I regret my motherhood experiences. While working on this article, I travelled in a time machine, reflecting upon the past, but this time, I found myself thinking about being an empowering and revolutionary mother. This time, I did not just recall all the embarrassing moments when I could not perform my role properly or fulfill the requirements of normative motherhood. This time, I could see myself as an authentic mother who makes her own decisions based on her cultural, and religious norms which challenge the dominant norms of normative motherhood (O'Reilly, "Normative Motherhood"). Moreover, I learned that by voicing and validating my experiences of maternal regrets, I was able to feel the authenticity of my

mothering struggles. By learning from their own lived experiences, mothers can expose the normative dictation of "essentialization, naturalization, and idealization, as well as the oppressive societal conditions of patriarchal motherhood that regulate and restrain women's mothering" (O'Reilly, "Maternal Regrets" 592).

A feminist killjoy is someone who is not only uncomfortable with the status quo established by racism, misogyny, and patriarchy but also struggles to make changes in society by speaking up or changing their perceptions (Ahmed, 2017). The bitter experiences of my life made me challenge my thinking about myself and others around me. Ahmed argues that a feminist killjoy becomes a problem while identifying the problem; somehow, it makes her the killer of another person's joy. Naming someone a "killjoy" inhibits feminism and questions the changing social norms that are unfair or unjust in favour of the status quo. Thus, all feminists are killjoys because they are critical of happiness derived from domination. By questioning the social construction of Muslim motherhood, I felt a killjoy of the normative construction of Muslim motherhood because it is layered socially and culturally, not Islamically. Some Muslim mothers might not agree with this, as for them, mothering is something that comes from love only. I respect that, but motherhood is constructed. To survive, mothers need to support one another so that they can share their experiences, difficulties, and killjoy moments (Ahmed 2017).

O'Reilly emphasizes matricentric feminism that focuses on empowering mothering, and it denies or challenges the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood and its construction. As she has said, "I have sought to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist" ("Matricentric Feminism" 26). I like to elaborate on this idea because empowered motherhood encourages mothers to focus on living a life of true authenticity, embracing imperfect moments and trusting themselves.

Matricentric feminism also provides a gender analysis that not only helps the reader understand maternal oppression and resistance but also puts mothering at its centre because it focuses on mothers and mothering. Having my son inside me made me so strong that I never asked for help from anyone around me, but there was no one to ask for help. My feminist killjoy life experience informs how I understand the concepts of right and wrong, and what it means for people in different situations. Ahmed (2017) argues that a feminist "heart beats the wrong way" (246). A person's feelings and emotions can make their judgments wrong and right. For example, what is right for one person may be wrong for another. My concept of right was becoming a feminist mother and a killjoy to others and I understand if it is wrong for some others.

Feminists become killjoys because of their situation, but they keep doing it as a way to survive and make sense of and transform their situation (Ahmed

and Gorey). This is how my situation made me a killjoy, and now I cannot stop being a killjoy in instances where I see the happiness of others derived from the exploitation of women. I refuse to be involved in the community and their events because I cannot forget that when I needed them, they were not there.

Ahmed ends her book with two delectable tools: a killjoy survival kit, which helps to uphold one's feminism, and a killjoy manifesto, a kind of mission statement for intersectional feminism. In my survival kit, I have my emotions, my struggles, my fragile life, and the joy I fought for, and as a tool, I have my children and my sense of mothering. For marginalized mothers, there is not much choice other than just practising empowering mothering, embracing the imperfect moments in their lives, and trusting their mothering style. O Reilly stresses the importance of not labelling motherhood but modelling it instead of mentoring motherhood.

Marginalized mothers raise their children according to what they have been taught through modelling by their mothers, before that their grandmothers and so on. Since these mothering traditions and norms are true to their values and beliefs, marginalized mothers resist the ideal norms of intensive or normative mothering. However, there might be consequences for these mothers or their children because the resistance depends on their positionality (Rolfe). For example, privileged, white, middle-class women may get away with feminist mothering or empowered mothering, but for marginalized mothers, the consequences are different. Marginalized mothers showcase their resistance and agency to reform patriarchal, socially constructed motherhood. The empowered mothering narrative shifts the power from institutional motherhood to mothers themselves. Rich calls these mothers "courageous." I was also a courageous mother, and I cannot stop being one.

The pressure of being an empowered mother can also oppress mothers. I cannot imagine myself being a super mom, doing it all, and still feeling empowered because the expectations are oppressive. I question myself, asking if I am a feminist mother or an empowered mother. Do I perform a normative mother character when in society or play an intensive mothering role when working harder than I need to be to fulfill the needs of my children? I struggled to explain my mothering experiences. I was hesitant to explain my regrets and guilt about mothering. I thought it aloud before I attempted to put it on the page. I cried and smiled. I felt weak, and I felt empowered at the same time. It was challenging to read and write my own story, but I did it. I showcased my agency and resistance. I unmasked my motherhood. I mothered against motherhood (O'Reilly, "Empowered and Feminist Mothering" 624). Maushart argues: "The struggle to unmask motherhood is the first step in reconciling reproductive power with social rights and responsibilities—a peculiarly female challenge with repercussions for all humanity" (300). I am raising my daughter as a future young mother who can unmask motherhood and its challenges

while not worrying constantly about the social stigma of bad mothering. I taught her that it is okay if she chooses not to be a mother or to be one. It is okay for her to discuss how she feels about her decision to be a mother, even if that includes negative feelings. It is okay to validate those concerns and feelings because she will always have my support as I am still in the normative motherhood loop of being a supportive and good mother but in an empowered and empowering way.

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LEAH ALDRIDGE

"Your Children Will Soon be Forgotten:" *12 Years a Slave* and the 'Seeding' of Black Motherhood

This paper investigates how the 2013 film 12 Years a Slave, *through the character of Eliza, makes visible struggles associated with Black motherhood that persist today as interlocking systems and institutions of oppression. Although Eliza occupies the narrative periphery, her experience of sudden loss and grief feels current as modern Black mothers confront sudden familial separation, grief, the disparagement of Black women's health, and societal forgetting of Black children. While liberalisms would have us embrace the idea that chattel slavery no longer affects modern American society, this article insists that those connections be attended to if we are to understand contemporary challenges to modern-day Black motherhood. Finally, this article asserts that Black motherhood be characterized as one that elevates traditions, such as kinship, nurtures collective families, and moves beyond surviving to thriving to ensure that our children not be forgotten.*

Nineteen minutes into Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave*, we hear "Mama!" off-camera from ten-year-old Randall, as Eliza, a young Black woman, enters a slave pen clasping the hand of her seven- or eight-year-old daughter, Emily. Mother, son, and daughter forcefully embrace. It is an emotional moment tinged with dread. We know this family unit will soon be ripped apart, succumbing to the economic logic of chattel slavery. As we had anxiously anticipated, Eliza (Adepero Oduye) is sold to Master Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), separately from her children at a New Orleans auction. When violently removed from her son and daughter, Eliza erupts into a "paroxysm of grief" (Northup 81). Suffering from this loss, Eliza weeps inconsolably the entire way to Master Ford's plantation. Upon Eliza's arrival, she is greeted by the plantation mistress who asks about Eliza's disposition. When Mistress Ford learns the source of Eliza's grief, she tells Eliza in what appears to be an

expression of sympathy to "get something to eat and some rest. Your children will soon be forgotten."

Eliza's emergence in the 2010s connects the past to the present, where she joins a chorus of grieving Black mothers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who lost their children to sudden separations due to racialized violence. Eliza's experience thus becomes not so distant but strangely modern—one that reminds us of the persistent tenuousness of and constant threats to Black motherhood. We are compelled to meditate on Eliza's story; in doing so, we witness what was seeded long ago and comprehend how various forces over time and space—from slavery to Jim Crow to the violence that spurred each iteration of #BlackLivesMatter—compel Black mothers to forget their children. This article posits *12 Years a Slave* as a historical cine-memory connecting the historical seeding of interlocking systems of oppression to its contemporary fruits against forces that would sever those ties.

Eliza and the Obama Era of Looking Back

The big screen adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana* made visible the apparatuses of institutional and systemic white supremacy—what Charles Mills theorizes as, "a particular mode of domination, with its special norms for allocating benefits and burdens, rights and duties; its own ideology; and an internal, at least semiautonomous logic that influences law, culture, and consciousness" ("Blackness Visible" 98). This film brings the contours of white supremacy, or that "unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today" ("Racial Contract" 1), into sharp relief, as it constructs the perimeters and parameters of Black kinship. Modernity's formation of the new world via violence, conquest, and colonialism crystallized racial hierarchies with white, heteropatriarchal families dominant and conflated that dominant position with notions of nationhood. With "families" come lineage, entitlement, wealth, power, and a sense of knowing, belonging, and identity.

McQueen cinematically contributes to our historical understanding of racially hierarchized family formations *in media res*, validating cinema's right to be among those who contribute to historical discourse or storytelling of the past (Martin and Wall). Furthermore, as cine-memory, *12 Years a Slave* can be read as " a political project parsed through the history film as a form of political critique" (Martin and Wall 447). McQueen's film then recalls how during the antebellum period, enslaved Blacks were allowed the semblance of family formation, but these families had no legal standing. They could be uprooted and relocated in whole or in part and disassembled and reassembled with new partners at any time. Women, men, and children of all ages could and would

be sold sometimes as family units, or, at the pleasure of slavers, familial ties would be severed, and persons sold separately. In addition to large-scale auctions with lots of four to seven hundred persons, sales of Black mothers separated from their children allowed for them to be "sold privately … mortgaged, transferred, exchanged, given away, used as collateral, or sold through a legal deed" (Berry 16). The normalized and routine selling of Black women, men, and children over several hundred years ensured natal alienation—or the forced forgetting and disconnection from knowledge of the historical self, by cutting ties to familial, regional, cultural, and kinship traditions and culture—would have lingering impacts on Black family formation. While any family may experience sudden separation or loss, this discussion focuses on the psyche, and the emotional and physical impact of anti-Black racism on Black motherhood.

We cannot underestimate the significance of *12 Years a Slave* (and numerous other slavery/civil rights era content) during President Barack Obama's second term. The appearance of these films and television shows during the successive administrations of the country's first Black president reminded us to "look at how far we have come," invoking progress narratives that want to declare the eradication of anti-Black racism and white supremacy—that we are postracial. But Henry Giroux reminds us of the widely discernible impact of neoliberalism on race. Neoliberalism's empowerment of the individualized subject has shifted the agents of racism away from systems and institutions of power that structure inequality among racialized populations, towards ideological assumptions and practices that reframe racial barriers and biases as irrelevant, where success is a matter of individual agency or inadequacy, which legitimizes dismantling the nation-state's role in militating against social forces that inherently create inequality. With this particular rise of the individualized subject, we witness in action an "utterly privatized discourse that erases any trace of racial injustice by denying the very notion of the social and operations of power through which racial politics are organized and legitimated" (H. Giroux 191-211).

When juxtaposed against numerous quality-of-life indicators demonstrating entrenched racialized inequality (e.g., the war on drugs and overincarceration), it becomes apparent how in the Age of Obama, we arrive at a mischaracterization of the postracial as the end of racism, when instead, it is "born-again racism" as David Theo Goldberg has called it (S. Giroux). Popular and critical discourses have characterized the postracial as a temporal moment where race no longer functions as a determinant in structuring, shaping, and perpetuating social inequity and injustice or as a barrier to Black success, as exemplified by Obama's ascendency. Despite neoliberalism's work to divorce root from fruit, continued political, sociocultural, and economic disparities among Black communities evince a persistent presence of the past. As an example, in 2021, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that stressors associated

with systemic racism (Dreyer) complicate Black maternal-child health and reproductive autonomy. The arrival of McQueen's cinematic slave narrative in the postracial era resists efforts to hermetically relegate historical harms to the past—such as Mistress Ford's attitude towards Black motherhood—and insists that we understand how the residuum of those systems and institutions extend across time to the present moment.

The Weight of Eliza's Story and the Force of Forgetting

Northup's first-person point-of-view account positions him as a witness to the indignities and injustices of American slavery as he journeys from freedom to captive to enslavement and freedom again. His testimony is then imbued with truths and matters of fact relating to those encountered during this twelve-year odyssey, but the surrealist horror of chattel slavery does not end in 1865 or the Reconstruction era. The film reveals roots of institutional oppression where "the social system embedded within slavery as depicted in the film is one that survived long past the Emancipation Proclamation—the one that resulted in the murder of Emmett Till a century after Northup published his autobiography" (Chait).

In both the book and the film, Eliza is one of many souls who cross paths with Northup, leaving their presence indelibly etched in his memory. As a preamble to Eliza's story, Northup writes, "It is necessary in this narrative, in order to present a full and truthful statement of all the principal events in the history of my life, and to portray the institution of Slavery as I have seen and known it to speak of well-known places, and of many persons who are yet living." (49-50). We can infer narrative importance in documenting Eliza's plight as it appears across several chapters in numerous subsections: "Maternal Sorrows," "Eliza's Sorrows," "Parting of Randall and Eliza," "Eliza's Agony on Parting From Little Emily," and, "She Still Mourns For Her Children" (Northup).

The inclusion of Eliza's experience is one of affective remembrance emphasizing Black mothers' sorrow from loss conditioned by subjugation. Sasha Turner makes distinct enslaved women's grief, noting that slavery's archives frequently obfuscate their emotional trauma: "The anxiety and grief of enslaved mothers does not carry the same weight as studying maternal loss and bereavement in other (free) social settings where one implication is how mothers through mourning were elevated as the emotional center of the family" (245). For most of Eliza's approximately twenty minutes of screen time, she weeps, which affords her no sympathy or relief. In fact, Mistress Ford declares that she "cannot have that kind of depression about." In the next scene, Eliza is dragged away by overseers, ostensibly to be sold to another plantation. Grief and sorrow experienced by Black mothers can be suppressed, silenced, and/or banished from whiteness when resulting from societal

institutions that impinge upon this relationship, (re)producing an internal logic that believes, because it cannot perceive Black grief, there must not be any injury.

Northup writes that after having not seen Eliza for several months, "she asked if I had forgotten them, and a great many times inquired if I still remembered how handsome little Emily was—how much Randall loved her—and wondered if they were living still" (107). Later Northup states, "Eliza never after saw or heard of Emily or Randall. Day nor night ... were they ever absent from her memory. In the cotton field, in the cabin, always and everywhere, she was talking of them—often *to* them, as if they were actually present" (88). Eliza fears forgetting, not remembering, and not being remembered by both herself and her children. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman articulates the impact of such conditioning, where being made to "forget your kin [you] lose sight of your country and cease to think of freedom" (157). For Eliza, forgetting her children affords no freedom, where social death is the precursor to physical death. Even though Mistress Ford's utterances do not appear in the source material, screenwriter John Ridley consolidates Eliza's documented grief, refracts it, and indexically points towards its source: white supremacist institution and its violence, indifference toward Black humanity, and imperviousness to Black trauma. In Mistress Ford, contemporary audiences for *12 Years a Slave* witness a historical seeding of attitudes, practices, policies, and violence that permeate contemporary American social systems and cultural strata to this day and create conditions where Black mothers experience racialized loss (i.e., from what once was) that then morphs into perverse racialized absence (i.e., that which never was), a paradigmatic distinction borrowed from the work of Khalil Saucier and Tyron Woods. We now understand Mistress Ford's line not as empathy but as a directive—your children will soon be forgotten.

Black Motherhood's Struggle across the Longue Durée

Discussing historical Blackness can be tricky. It is principally challenged by persistent beliefs in precolonial ahistoricity, and/or its intrinsic and inescapable 'pathology' due to its emergence as part of the colonial project. This discussion seeks to contribute to the ongoing unpacking of those characterizations by showing how historical formations created structures, institutions, and ideologies that harmed US Black motherhood during the era of chattel slavery. Despite a contemporary desire to sever the present from the past, others adroitly recall the past as a methodology for comprehending modern-day social inequities. Historian Fernand Braudel stresses how the longue durée, cyclical in nature, insists upon a "multiplicity of temporalities and the exceptional importance of the long term … [as] history with a hundred faces"

(173). Rather than treat history and its impacts as discrete events, Braudel emphasizes how the historical occurrence is "infinitely stretchable," whereby by linking them through cause and effect, we understand a thickening of history with "underlying realities that then become impossible to disentangle one from the other" (174) so that the "time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days" (184). In ascertaining the origins of contemporary states of being, when we enter one of these temporalities, we enter all of them.

To be clear, the cessation of chattel slavery in 1865 did not end ideological attitudes and institutional violence that structured and reinforced practices and policies of racial inferiority and superiority. For example, in October 2013, *The New York Times* hosted a discussion with Steve McQueen, Chiwetel Ejiofor, artist Kara Walker, and historian Eric Foner about *12 Years a Slave,* facilitated by writer-producer Nelson George in an article titled "An Essentially American Narrative." George starts with what he calls "contemporary analogues [such as] stop and frisk," the practice among New York City police of stopping and detaining Blacks and Latinos without cause. George then asks filmmaker McQueen if present-day racism influenced his film, which is set in the past. McQueen states: "History has a funny thing of repeating itself. Also, it's the whole idea of once you've left the cinema, the story continues. Over a century and a half to the present day. I mean, you see the evidence of slavery as you walk down the street." George and McQueen's testimonial to these connections reveals subjugated knowledge perhaps connected to lived experience. Surprisingly, Eric Foner, author of numerous books on slavery and Reconstruction, offers a rejoinder that dissociates fruit from seed:

> You cannot understand the United States without knowing about the history of slavery. Having said that, I don't think we should go too far in drawing parallels to the present. Slavery was a horrific institution, and it is not the same thing as stop and frisk. In a way, putting it back to slavery takes the burden off the present. The guys who are acting in ways that lead to inequality today are not like the plantation owner. They're guys in three-piece suits. They're bankers who are pushing African-Americans into subprime mortgages.

With all due respect to Foner, without making these connections and linkages, Blackness is left with essentialist explanations for present-day social disparities, systemic bias, and institutional oppression. It is clear to the interviewer and the filmmaker that contemporary racism is connected to past institutional and systemic strategies of Black subjugation. For Foner to deny that "stop and frisk," the purpose of which is "to humiliate black and brown men … in a way that allows the police to dominate them" (Laughland) is a (not so distant) cousin of antebellum slave patrols is to suggest that history be read as event-

centric, siloed as fixed moments in time that can exist outside of their real, material, cyclical, conceptual, or philosophical connections to other events. Alternatively, Braudel's longue durée aids contemporary understandings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as deeply extended from before the antebellum period, diasporic, and serialized conjunctures, that provide contexts and conditions as extended events. Doing so reveals the genealogical relationship between "stop and frisk" and its historical antecedents of state-sanctioned modes of racialized surveillance, containment, and social control such as educational and foster care systems ("compulsory apprenticeship" of Black children), and overincarceration (Black Codes/vagrancy laws).

It is curious as to why McQueen would present Eliza as ceaselessly mourning throughout *12 Years a Slave*, but after subsequent viewings, it becomes clear: Eliza does not stop because anti-Black violence has not stopped. Eliza's ceaseless mourning is echoed by the endless parade of mothers impacted by anti-Black and state-sanctioned violence: from Mamie Till (Emmitt Till) to the Obama/#BLM years with Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon Martin), RowVaughn Wells (Tyre Nichols), Samaria Rice (Tamir Rice), Sheneen McClain (Elijah McClain), Geneva Reed-Veal (Sandra Bland), Tamika Palmer (Breonna Taylor), Angela Helton (Rekia Boyd), and Lezley McSpadden (Michael Brown), just to name a few. Bettersten Wade-Robinson and Mary Moore-Glenn, residents of Jackson, Mississippi, are the mothers of Dexter Wade and Marrio Moore, respectively. In 2023, Dexter was struck and killed by a Jackson, Mississippi, police officer; and Marrio died from an incident believed to be drug related. In both instances, the mothers were not notified of their sons' deaths until six and nine months after Dexter and Marrio, respectively, had been buried in a pauper's grave by penal farm inmates. The Jackson police and mayor have blamed communication errors. Wade-Robinson had filed missing person reports to no avail even though Dexter had identifying information on his person, and Moore-Glenn learned of Marrio's demise from a press release listing unsolved homicides. While it has since been revealed that over 200 unclaimed, ethnically diverse bodies were buried in Jackson's pauper's grave, Dexter's and Marrio's deaths and their respective mothers' public anguish were an all too familiar spectre. We say their names so that they will not be forgotten.

Additionally, the well-documented "transgenerational consequences of racial discrimination" point to pervasive and persistent health disparities for Black folks in the United States, including children, with "rates of morbidity and mortality over the life course higher for African Americans than for most other race/ethnic groups" (Goosby and Heidbrink 1, 630). Is it any wonder then that after the 2019 police shooting death of Atatiana Jefferson, her fifty-nine-year-old father Marquis Jefferson and fifty-five-year-old mother Yolanda Carr would die within six months of her death; and her sister, Ashley Carr in

late 2022? Similarly, Kalief Browder, arrested as a seventeen-year-old, was held in Rikers Island for three years without a trial, mostly in solitary confinement for an alleged stolen backpack. While detained and after his release Kalief made multiple suicide attempts, finally succeeding in 2015 at age twenty-two; his mother Venida Browder died one year later. In 2019, Kalief's brother, Deion Browder wrote the following in *USA Today*:

> My mother blamed herself for Kalief's detention because she couldn't afford the $3,000 bail money. She cried herself to sleep every night while he was away, filled with guilt for being unable to help her child. Still through the pain she went to visit him every day... Haunted by the mental and physical torture he was subjected to by officers at Rikers Island, including two years of solitary confinement, Kalief took his own life in 2015 at our home.... My mother, who had already grieved for her son when he was detained, then had to grieve him for the rest of her life.... The stress of fighting for justice and the pain over her son's death literally broke my mother's heart, resulting in her premature death at age 63.... It was only a year after Kalief's passing.

Unpacking Venida Browder's situation does not allow for the disentanglement of historical factors, as Braudel points out, which extends from the past into the present and future. Indeed, correlative and compounding factors—such as stop and frisk by law enforcement "conditioned by broad social forces and attitudes including a long history of racism" (Williams and Murphy 1), cash bail, and a corrupt and abusive criminal punishment system, not to mention any negative experiences or deficiencies Ms. Browder may have experienced within an inadequate healthcare system—are all contributing factors. While there are causal factors leading to Ms. Browder's passing, Deion Browder and the collective souls of Black folks point to the impact racialized systemic oppression has on a Black mother's grief. Solomon Northup's reflection upon Eliza's decline echoes this sentiment:

> When we left Washington Eliza's form was round and plump. She stood erect, and in her silks and jewels, presented a picture of graceful strength and elegance. Now she was but a thin shadow of her former self. Her face had become ghastly haggard, and the once straight and active form was bowed down as if bearing the weight of a hundred years.... Grief had gnawed remorselessly at her heart until her strength was gone. (159-60).

The longue durée of Black motherhood includes a historical legacy of anxiety and dread that at any moment kinfolk may be lost as the result of systemic racism meted out via racist institutions, the consequence of which may include physical ailment for survivors—until they are no longer survivors.

Complex Identities across the Longue Durée of Black Motherhood

The enslavement experience that Orlando Patterson calls "social death" is forged through violence, natal alienation, and dishonour, which consequently leaves an enslaved person with "no socially recognized existence outside of his master, [thus becoming] a social non person" (5). In the United States, white patriarchal capitalist control over Black women's sexuality and offspring has been an American reality before the founding of the nation and is well documented. One such method of control over Black women's sexuality and motherhood is the 1662 legal doctrine of partus sequitur ventrem, which codified Black children as enslaved following the mother's status and were also the chattel property of the master. Under chattel slavery, the Black female nonperson was expected to produce additional nonpersons as soon as menstruation began and have, on average, ten children (given high infant mortality rates) with no regard to who the father may be and could be separated from her offspring as they too were the master's property—it is simultaneously mothering and non-mothering. The enslaved Black woman's added value is expressly tied to sexual exploitation: in her ability to produce more property for the master's financial enrichment either through breeding, or via sexual exploitation as a "fancy girl... a female slave who, often because of their fair complexion, were sex trafficked for white men" (Green 18). Black mothers realize the always-present possibility of anti-Black violence that may be visited upon their children. Does Eliza anticipate what awaits light-skinned Emily?

From its American origins, Black motherhood as an identity is fraught and becomes more so when viewed through the nested lenses of race, sex, and class. Much of our contemporary understanding of motherhood emanates from white, Western Enlightenment-era European notions in association with idealized femininity, domesticity, nation-building, and Christianity and positions this understanding as the gold standard of motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins points out how the "private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for childrearing is less applicable to Black families" (1). Less applicable, largely due to social conditions established in the past that evolved during the longue durée into "born again racism" in contemporary US systems and institutions (e.g., child welfare, criminal and legal, and education) built on the standards of white nuclear families. What *12 Years a Slave* makes visible is how white supremacy will create those conditions and then indict Black mothers for their circumstances, as was the case with Danial Patrick Moynihan in his 1965 report *The Negro Family*. As acts of resistance and wariness of lingering historical harms, Black motherhood will not look like white motherhood under white supremacist patriarchal regimes. All one has to do is ask Black mothers about having "The Talk" with their children when it comes to encounters with law enforcement (Sanders and Young).

Wherever there is a discussion about Black motherhood, there needs to be a discussion of Black female bodily autonomy and sexual agency, which are antithetical to social death. Under patriarchal dominance, regulating and controlling all women's reproductive abilities are always on the agenda, but there are important distinctions to be made about Black women. Consider the gynecological experimentations of J. Marion Sims on enslaved Black women or how the nation swung from breeding Black people as chattel to fear of too many Black people, leading to forced sterilization of impoverished or incarcerated women. Radical Black feminists, such as those that formed the Combahee River Collective (CRC), established in 1974, crystalized their organizing through an "integrated analysis" of "sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," where the "synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" ("CRC Statement"). The unique experience of Black women in the US and globally, they asserted, must recognize Black women's sexuality, class, and gendered identities as inflected by imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. Much of CRC's early activism, in distinction to white feminism, took up reproductive justice in response to coerced and forced sterilization of Black and Brown women, which proliferated among the marginalized, incarcerated, and poverty classes.

Furthermore, we understand the sociocultural and political inscription of the Black female form has historically been made abject—one that first invites and then rationalizes sexual degradation and domination. Sexual violence is only one of many tactics used to transform the Black female into the enslaved or an instance of what Hartman calls the "dispossessed subject/object of property" ("Ruses of Power" 543). Within slave systems of dominance, Black bodies lose gender differentiation where the "female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver" (Spillers 20). Patriarchy, with its historical demonstrations of sexual terror globally, shares a mutually constitutive relationship with slave technologies, institutional sanctions, and violence for purposes of empire-building and ethnic cleansing in producing male-dominated social structures. Are Black women not keenly aware, via oral histories, generational traumas, social conditions, and what Patricia Hill Collins identified as "controlling images" of this history that mark Black womanhood and motherhood identity formation?

Such ambivalence is made visible with Eliza and her children who are from different fathers, as prescribed under chattel slavery; one child is the result of sexual congress with Mr. Berry, her former master, of whom she speaks kindly and has fond remembrances. As Eliza describes it, Mr. Berry moved her and her children into the big house, where she had servants, jewels, and silks, in what sounds like concubinage, but can a Black woman during this time freely choose concubinage given the options? And on an even more intimate exploration, are Black women at this time allowed sexual pleasure and desire?

Spillers notes that "[u]nder these arrangements [of chattel slavery], the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis" (221). According to Northup's accounts, Eliza and Mr. Berry were in a nine-year relationship in defiance of antimiscegenation laws in effect in the US until 1967. Given the circumstances under which Black motherhood may or may not occur, and a history of sexual violations from routinized systemized sexual assault, sex trafficking, and gynecological medical experimentation, is it fair to say that Black women can carry a fair amount of unique fear related to motherhood? The precarity plaguing the bonds of Black kinship is real, as it extends throughout the longue durée into the present moment, Black women's sexuality continues to be fraught and disruptive to notions of motherhood, compelling us to make connections across the longue durée and see these successive histories as multiple temporalities and overlapping occurrences.

Conclusion

Thinking about Black motherhood in the US compels us to consider the character of Eliza: a Black single mom of two kids from different fathers whose kids are taken away from her by a social institution for the benefit of that institution, leaving her inconsolable and eventually dying from grief. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* makes visible white supremacist systems of incomprehensible cruelty creating an experience of Black motherhood that is haunted by anti-Black violence that includes the possibility of sudden mother-child separation leading to inconsolable all-consuming sorrow. The film reveals a systematic process of nonpersonhood and abjection, where agents of those systems demand Black mothers retain no memory of those separated children.

As cine-memory, an examination of Eliza's story critiques those interlocking systems by making the seeding of those systems of oppression visible in an era that would deny the impacts of said systems of oppression's continuance over the longue durée. Furthermore, Eliza's story informs the larger political project of resistance and struggle against anti-Black racism that targets Black maternal child health and reproductive justice in the current moment. Activists, advocates, and individuals must continue to make these connections as neoliberalism would deny the continued existence and force of historical harms, leaving Black mothers to blame for contemporary stressors that cause Black maternal grief and sorrow.

We can assume that a generalized, basic characteristic of motherhood is love and how mama bears will do anything to protect their children. However, as part of the racialized differentiation of woman as an identity category, the added dimension of protecting children and overcoming anti-Black racist

barriers is unique to Black women, which can create fear and stress for Black mothers. Journalist and Pulitzer Prize finalist Linda Villarosa chronicled the systemic, institutional, social, economic, and environmental impacts of racism in her book *Under the Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on American Lives*. In surveying over thirty years of her investigative writings about Black health disparities, she notes that the reasons for these health disparities are threefold: "long-standing discrimination in the institutions and structures of American society that has harmed and continues to harm Black communities, making them less "healthy"; racism in society that wears away the bodies of Black people and those from other groups who are treated poorly; and bias in healthcare that creates a system of unequal treatment" (166). Such an unequal system is evidenced by studies revealing "infant mortality rates for America's Black babies are more than twice the rate of white babies; "Black babies are more than three times as likely to die from complications related to low birthweight as compared to white babies in the U.S.,"; (Ely and Driscoll), and "U.S. maternal mortality rates for Black women and birthing people are three to four times higher than rates for their white counterparts" (Peterson, et al), as exemplified by the 2023 death of April Valentine, who died during childbirth at Inglewood hospital in Southern California and the subsequent state-level investigation seeking to document racial bias in her treatment leading to her death.

Black motherhood as a concept and practice has developed and shared alternatives to mainstream or Eurocentric understandings of being a parent in defiance of an anti-Black racism that wants to forget Black children. Radical Black activism works to eradicate the various interlocking systems of oppression that create negative health disparities for Black parenting. Othermothering, doulas, home births, self-care, resiliency, principled parenting, kinship care, multigenerational homes and collective families, tapping into social support and information networks, and intentional Black joy strengthen Black motherhood across social and economic strata. Black motherhood, which is as diverse as the mosaic of American Blackness, has at a minimum functioned as sites and acts of resistance throughout US history. And, most of all, Black motherhood strives to ensure that Black children will be remembered.

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JANICE P. DE-WHYTE

A Matter of Life and Death: Maternity in Antiquity and Beyond

Throughout history, motherhood has been a primary occupation, perhaps in some instances a preoccupation, of many women. Ancient corpora, such as the Hebrew Bible and comparative ancient Near Eastern literature, highlight the priority of maternity. Preserved within such ancient texts are pronatalist notions, representative of cultural and religious values, regarding childbearing, reproductive loss, maternal morbidity, and mortality. Yet despite the often deathly realities of childbirth, numerous women navigated the precarious stages of pregnancy and postpartum life in hopes of securing their status within the patrilineage. Indeed, motherhood brought social goods and benefits that were difficult to attain in other ways. From the vantage point of the present, the higher incidence of morbidity and mortality resulting from birthing in antiquity is jarring. Readers of ancient accounts may fall prey to a significant interpretive trap, decrying the "primitive" problems of the past while neglecting to notice and address corresponding and comparable issues in the present. Examining the past should not be a mere act of historical gawking but should provide information and impetus for holistic and sustainable change in the present. Despite advances in healthcare and technology, too many women today continue to sustain injury or suffer death during maternity. Motherhood can be a grave experience. Expectant women, especially those from racialized and marginalized communities, who are anticipating the possibility of new life, are all too frequently caught in the throes of death. Examining extant sources from the past offers us opportunities to interrogate the present and actively work towards a more life-giving future. The task is an urgent one. Today, as in antiquity, maternity is still a matter of life and death.

Throughout history, motherhood has been a primary occupation, perhaps in some instances a preoccupation, of many women. Still, the process of becoming a mother has long been a matter of life and death for women. This reality is

borne out not only in modern health and social science data concerning maternity but also in ancient corpora, such as the Hebrew Bible, in which fertility and infertility feature prominently. By examining such sources as the Hebrew Bible and comparative ancient Near Eastern literature, we can better understand the complexities and challenges of reproduction. Investigating the ancient past and journeying through foreign places via texts depicting aspects of women's lived experiences reveal significant realities and issues related to maternity.

"A matter of life and death," the idiom used to stress the gravity of a situation, is apt. Life and death. Vitality and fatality. Maternity encapsulates both ends of this continuum and so much more in between. Records of the life-giving and death-dealing realities of motherhood pervade the Hebrew Bible and other ancient comparative literature. The basis of ancient Israel's kinship system was the bêt 'āb, "the house of the father" or the patrilineagen (Meyers "The Family in Early Israel" 34; Nikhai 358; Ebeling 28). Perpetuating the bêt 'āb was crucial for determining descent and inheritance and maintaining the honour of the house. Not only was perpetuating the patrilineal family a chief concern of men—the ones through whom descent and inheritance were reckoned—but it was also a concern of many women who sought honour and security through childbirth (De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an* 19). Examining ancient sources reveals how some women navigated a patrilineal system to achieve their desires, security, and honour. Pronatalism, the collective penchant or preference for childbearing, characterizes the general outlook of various cultures and societies in the ancient Near East and is still foundational in some non-Western cultures today.

Maternity: Life-Giving Experiences

Motherhood was a matter of life, but it was also a matter of death. First, let us explore what we mean by motherhood being a matter of life. We can emphasize the process of life-giving; conception and birth concern the creation of new life, new family members, and new citizens of the community. Extant sources shed light on the centrality of fertility in ancient Near Eastern cultures (Bidmead 41). Using figurines and herbal remedies and consulting with deities were a few examples of the fertility strategies some women employed to realize their fertility goals (Ackerman 17–18; Budin 134). Tests evaluating whether a woman could conceive were attested (Stol 37; Reiner 124–138; Steinert 107–109). Amulets and necklaces could also be worn as conception aids. One source prescribes: "21 stones to help a barren woman become pregnant; you string them on a linen thread and put them around her neck" (Biggs 9). Although male potency, comparatively speaking, was not often called into question, there are a few interesting cases in which it is cited as a probable

cause of infertility. One ancient medical text documents the work of professional healers who prepared special oils mixed with iron ore and applied it to male genitalia to promote virility and increase fertility (Biggs 15).

Beyond the obvious point that motherhood involves the creation of life, motherhood is also about life-giving in that this status is deemed to add more meaning to one's life. In other words, motherhood was not only about perpetuating the patrilineal family; as a rite of passage, it produced meaning and fulfilment. Elsewhere, I have argued that in our modern Western discourse, we often speak about reproductive rights, and rightly so, yet in the ancient world (and even today in some non-Western traditional cultures), this is not the primary lens through which childbirth is viewed (De-Whyte, "The Reproductive Rite"). Modern discourse and debate on reproductive rights are shaped by two consequential ideologies. The first ideology is the biomedical conception of the body, which is central to Western allopathic medicine (Marcum 311–312). Examining the biomedical approach of Western medicine, James Marcum helpfully highlights the dominating perspective of the body as that of "the machine." In this model, "the human body is viewed as a material, mechanized object that is reducible to a collection of physical parts" (311). This Western model contrasts with other holistic models espoused in various non-Western contexts (ancient and current). For instance, "the phenomenological model of the body as a lived body or embodied person reclaims the person's wholeness or integrity, especially with respect to the lived context" (311-12). Analyzing ancient Near Eastern perspectives about the body and factors affecting individuals' lived experiences within a communal/collectivist society helps to understand maternity's portrayal and promotion within ancient and modern contexts.

The second central ideology is the notion of the autonomous individual. Within this paradigm, women can make decisions valued by others. These two fundamental pillars undergird a significant part of the modern discourse on women's reproductive rights.

In antiquity and certain non-Western traditional cultures today, motherhood is not defined and interpreted through the lens of rights but of rites. Motherhood is primarily conceived of as a rite of passage rather than a matter of reproductive rights. Attaining this rite of passage brought honour and security for the woman. Birth brings other social goods and benefits that would be difficult to achieve in any other way. Anthropological studies elucidate the honour-shame nexus so foundational to many ancient Near Eastern societies (Brayford 164). Honour was the crucial currency of human relationships, and the goal was to amass and bequeath as much honour through the generations of a family and tribe (Brayford 164; Crook 591–611).

In addition to honour, fertility ensured socioeconomic security in a patrilineal context in which, for the most part, women did not inherit.[1] Adult

children would be able to provide support for their mother in the case where she was widowed. A barren woman was one whose honour and economic security were in jeopardy.[2] In an ancient context, rites of passage have far-reaching communal implications. Completing a rite of passage reflected positively on one's family, clan, tribe, and community. Childbirth gave meaning to life: the life of the community, the family, and the woman. As a rite of passage, the celebration of motherhood was not only to laud the successful outcome of a singleton or multiple pregnancy but equally marked the rebirth of the woman herself and her attainment of a new identity in the eyes of the community.

Maternity and Mortality: The Death-Dealing Realities

We have traced how motherhood is life-giving. However, we must also explore how motherhood is a matter of death. Motherhood connects to beliefs and experiences regarding mortality. Throughout history, motherhood has placed women in a precarious position. From conception to labour, delivery to postpartum life, women faced a plethora of life-threatening complications (Malamitsi-Puchner and Konstantakos 1374-75). Disability and death were possible for the woman. Instances of maternal morbidity and mortality are evident within the Hebrew Bible. The ancestral history in Genesis is filled with difficult birth narratives: "The difficulties surrounding the births of these important ancestors only increase as time passes. While Sarah 'only' battles infertility and conceives late in life, the next generation represented by Rebecca experiences infertility, a difficult pregnancy, and a difficult birth" (Bergmann 137). The persistent dangers of pregnancy and postpartum stages included miscarriage, stillbirth, and haemorrhaging, to name a few (Garroway, *Growing Up In Ancient Israel* 111–136). Still, women continued to navigate pregnancy and birth to bring new life into the world and experience their rebirth—that is, the attainment of a new identity. This new identity also brought a sense of honour and legacy.

Rachel, Laban's daughter, occupies first place in Jacob's affections. Yet Rachel demands "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Gen 30:1). The preferential place that she enjoys does not mitigate, in her perspective, the void that she experiences due to childlessness. The biblical narrative does not discuss some of its characters' inner thoughts and emotions. Yet considering the cultural backdrop of the ancient Near East, we may surmise that Rachel's dissatisfaction with her barrenness would also be shaped and influenced by communal attitudes. How does the community both define and affirm womanhood? A woman's value and contribution are often judged by her reproductive record. What exacerbates Rachel's discontent is the fecundity of her cowife and sister, Leah. Rachel becomes "jealous" of Leah, which is a catalyst for the demand

that the favoured wife makes of her husband (Gen 30:1). Chillingly, Rachel's threat that she must have children or die foreshadows her future demise. Her demand is bitterly ironic; she will have the children she so desires, but childbirth will be the death of her (Gen 35:16-19).

While journeying from Bethel, Rachel goes into an especially difficult labour (Gen 35:16). Although she is attended by a midwife attempting to allay her fear, Rachel's labour complications cannot be resolved to save her life. The midwife's exhortation, "Do not be afraid, for now, you will have another son," suggests that the concern in this difficult labour is not only for the mother but also for the baby's life, which is threatened in some manner during the labour. How did the midwife know that a son was to be born even before the baby had fully delivered? The Hebrew narrative suggests that the midwife describes what she sees in the present; she is not making a predictive statement. It may be that the midwife ascertains the infant's sex because he had presented himself feet, or buttocks, first with genitalia emerging before being delivered. In this case, Rachel's obstetrical complication was a breech birth (Blondheim and Blondheim 15). By informing Rachel that she has "another son," the midwife evokes the fulfillment of a previous prayer, and perhaps such an allusion is an expression of hope that Rachel will pull through the current birth event.

However long her travail, Rachel's presence of mind is ultimately consumed with naming her second son. On the cusp of life and death, Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow," is the name that Rachel selects for her baby (Gen 35:18). While Jacob changes Ben-oni's name to Binyamin, "son of my right hand," Rachel's statement of her sorrow augurs future devastation—the one which will inevitably be felt by Jacob when he is deceived into believing that his favoured son Joseph has been mauled to death by a wild animal (Gen 37:29-35). The beloved wife of Jacob does attain her desire of birthing her children, but it is at mortal cost. Rachel dies on the road between Bethel and Bethlehem (Gen 35:19). Rachel's uncompleted journey, her demise partway to their destination, is a symbol of a life cut short, her motherhood fatally interrupted.

The role of midwives in ancient maternal experiences cannot be underestimated. Midwifery was a specialized and highly valued skill (Meyers, "Archeology: A Window to the Lives of Israelite Women" 105). In Hittite culture, a midwife was known as a "woman of the birth stool" (Beckman 102). Birthing practices often required the mother to squat or kneel with the support of a birthing stool, or birthing bricks. Birthing brick designs varied from simple to ones that had text engraved on them" (Yee 149). In ancient Egypt, for example, "Spells and incantations on the bricks repelled any spirits of malicious intent against the mother and her newborn while the midwife sat in front of the woman giving birth and received the newborn" (Galpaz-Feller 47). Midwives were with women as they laboured for a new life while striving

to avoid the ever-present threat of death in childbirth. In the narratives of Rachel and Phinehas' wife, the birth attendant's words "Do not be afraid," reflect the role of advocacy that these specialists often embodied (Gen 35:17 and 1 Sam 4:20). The Exodus narrative features Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives who play crucial advocatory roles (Exod 1:16-17). When the Pharaoh attempts to coopt them to spearhead his systematic murder of Hebrew infant boys, Shiphrah and Puah disobey and defy the king and "they let the boys live" (Exod 1:17). Midwives participated in the celebration of ushering new life into the world, but given the high maternal mortality rate, they would also have been prepared to be the last faces and voices that some women saw and heard before death.

Motherhood placed women anticipating the possibility of new life, in the throes of death. This may have been especially true in cases where motherhood was perhaps involuntary. Hagar's escape into the desert, with her unborn child in tow, represents the precarious position that surrogates could find themselves in (Gen 16:6). If Hagar's narrative reveals anything about some of the abuses to which women of lower classes were subject (Maseyna 284), we can then deduce that birth may have been an even more dangerous predicament for someone whose status and security in the household was dependent on the valuation of their service (Oppenheim 292; Flynn 79).

Maternal mortality was a grave issue, but so was infant mortality. Based on archaeological and comparative studies, scholars note that survival rates for infants in ancient Israel were about fifty per cent (Bergmann 135). Shedding further light on the reasons for such a harrowing survival rate, Garroway notes, "Maladies, disease, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and lack of hygiene could lead to harmful conditions, and even simple things like the inability to latch and suckle could put an infant's life in peril" ("Rattle and Hum" 184). Therefore, if a woman wished to have "three children survive beyond the age of five" then she would likely have had to have "as many as six pregnancies—or more if preterm losses are included" (Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve* 99; Willett 80).

Surviving "Grown-Up" Children

In antiquity, losing one's children, at whatever age, was made all the more difficult because one entered a liminal space which was negatively interpreted culturally and spiritually (Melanchthon 65). Here another woman's account is worthy of note, Naomi mourns the deaths of her two sons and husband while a migrant in Moab (Ruth 1). To have reared her sons beyond the precarious and vulnerable stages of infancy and early childhood (Scurlock 137–185), watching them mature into manhood and then marry only to have them both die without one child to commemorate their name or secure the family

legacy—this is a great source of trauma for Naomi. It is a harrowing experience for a mother to survive her children, and in the ancient patrilineal context, the ordeal is intensified by the apparent erasure of the family line with the death of all of its male members.

Upon her return home, as she is speaking to the neighbourhood women, Naomi describes her loss this way: "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). In a culture in which barrenness was arguably a most bitter experience, Naomi's new autonym *Mara* frames her as the epitome of emptiness.

Additionally, Naomi's experience invites the reader to distinguish between biological barrenness and a predicament that equals or exceeds it: social barrenness. Elsewhere I have examined the barrenness tradition in the Hebrew Bible and chose the term "social barrenness" to encapsulate the experiences of women who, biologically speaking, were able to reproduce but did not attain this rite of passage due to particular social circumstances which rendered them childless: temporarily or permanently (De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an* 181–269). Naomi's social barrenness is evident in the fact that she had given birth to sons and reared them and celebrated their maturity as they married—only to lose them to death. Furthermore, Naomi's sons do not have children of their own, and this compounds the finality of their deaths and her sense of grief and loss. Such an understanding gives clarity to what the birth of Ruth and Boaz's child means to Naomi. She receives Obed not as her grandson but breastfeeds him as a sign of her embrace of him as a son in place of the two that she survived (Ruth 4:16; Chapman, 7). Interpreting and reengaging biblical narratives concerning barrenness can be constructive as individuals and groups navigate the meanings of both childlessness and motherhood (Yafeh-Deigh 630).

Maternal mortality, infant mortality, or losing children at any stage of their lives were existential tragedies. The eternal death of a person's name, their memory and legacy, occurred when they could not bear children. Within the ancient Near Eastern patrilineal context, "children were viewed as necessary because without them one would effectively disappear from history. The ancient Near East was predominantly illiterate; for one's name to live on after one's death, there had to be someone to keep it alive" (Moss and Baden 29). While the Hebrew Bible primarily presents the concerns of the patrilineal kinship system, this does not mean that women did not seek ways to preserve their place and name within such a context. Barrenness is an obstacle that must be overcome for a barren woman "is concerned with her memory and her own lineage" (Havrelock 163). Elsewhere, I show that "matrilineal undercurrents"—an original term I use to encapsulate some women's work for prominence and legacy via reproduction and childrearing—do surface even

within a patrilineal system (De-Whyte 94). Since children embodied the memories of their parents, a person who did not have children would essentially die another death with no legacy to survive them. The Hebrew Bible narratives depicting types of reproductive loss, including infertility, continue to resonate with realities experienced by women in particular cultural contexts today (Mbuwayesango).

Modern-Day Maternity: Still a Matter of Life and Death

In reading selected ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew narratives about (in) fertility, we find resonances of maternity experiences in a contemporary context. Today, despite advances in healthcare and technology, maternity continues to place women—seeking to bring life into the world—at the threshold of death. Pertinently, the latest research informs us that maternal morbidity and mortality persist at appallingly higher rates for women from historically oppressed and marginalized communities within Western society. Analyzing the United States, Anuli Njoku et al. document that the "social determinants of health show that poor maternal outcomes for Black individuals are caused by factors of racism that are embedded in healthcare and affect marginalized groups of individuals disproportionately" (438). The situation in the United Kingdom (UK) also raises many concerns. Black women in the UK are four times, and Asian women up to two times, more likely to die during pregnancy or the puerperium than their white counterparts (MBRACE-UK 7). Black mothers in Canada face equally dangerous outcomes. Canada has been critiqued for its race-evasive or colour-blind approach to maternal health. Such an approach effectively "denies, minimizes, and ignores how race, as a socially constructed category of difference, structures inequalities…. A 2005 study by researchers at McGill University found that Black women have substantially higher rates of preterm birth than white women, similar to patterns of maternal health disparities reported in the U.S. Yet still, there remains a dearth of race-based data on maternal and infant health in Canada" (Dayo et al. 2).

Identifying the unique challenges and dangers surrounding maternity is crucial. Reading about maternity in antiquity may tempt present-day people to focus largely on how "archaic" and "primitive" women's experiences were in the past. This is a mistake we often make today—to think that we have come so far and surmounted so much. Yet the statistics today tell us a different story; we have not come far enough. Undeniably, illness and death in pregnancy and birth were high within various parts of the ancient Near East. Yet today morbidity and mortality rates of mothers and infants, especially those from marginalized and racialized communities, are abysmally high considering the health resources and technology now available. The extent to which there is a

reckoning with the realities of structural racism and gender discrimination will determine the level of change to which health professions and wider society will commit.

Maternity is still a grave issue. Urgent and comprehensive action to drastically reduce the number of women suffering and dying during pregnancy and postpartum periods is not only the responsibility of maternal health providers. Scholars and practitioners from different fields also have the responsibility and opportunity to bring awareness and transformation through research and praxis. Ancient models of midwifery, the service and support of women, are instructive. Some are formally and professionally trained to provide medical treatment for pregnant and postpartum women. Then others are called to attend to pregnant and postpartum women—to support and stand with them in nonmedical ways to increase chances of survival and wellness. Practitioners and academics, allies and advocates, are needed to eradicate the crisis of disability and demise in maternity. We must bring our presence and tools to bear on behalf of those who are in the realm of reproduction. The present article is one such endeavour, joining the efforts of other academic and practitioner colleagues from various disciplines, to advocate for urgent change because maternal morbidity and mortality is still a matter of life and death.

Endnotes

1. Exceptions to this are detailed in the Hebrew narratives of Zelophehad's daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (Numbers 27). The collaboration of the five sisters in advocating for their inheritance results in a change of legislation. Achsah also receives land from her father, though it is not explicitly referred to as an inheritance but a blessing—land that has two water sources which made the land not only desirable but also lucrative (Joshua 15:18–19; Judges 1:15). Another noteworthy case of women receiving an inheritance is found in the mention of Jemimah, Keziah and Keren-happuch—the daughters of Job who were given an inheritance along with their seven brothers (Job 42:13–15).
2. "Barren" is not a word that is typically used to describe childless women within modern Western contexts. The intentional use of "barren" and "barrenness" within this article is to sensitize modern readers to the imagery and associations that such words carry and how these are reflective of wider attitudes regarding infertility and childlessness in the ancient world. For instance, "Barrenness is an agricultural term, implying that the soul– Sarai's womb– is inhospitable to life" (Gafney 30). In such a context, "a woman's womb was her destiny" (Weems 3). In the Western biomedical or allopathic model, infertility is clinically conceptualized. In ancient,

and even contemporary non-Western cultures, barrenness was primarily conceptualized in social and spiritual terms.

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