

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

Motherhood to Motherhoods

Ideologies of the “Feminine”

Fall / Winter 2024

Vol. 14 No. 2



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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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