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"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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