

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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The Moms Are Alright: Subverting Motherhood in Crisis in *Night Raiders*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*

*Present yet often relegated to the margins of the image or narrative (or both), the cinematic mother is historically a site of crisis (Fischer 30). In North American cinema, she is also historically a heterosexual white woman. The films *Night Raiders* (Danis Goulet, 2021), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022), and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* (Raven Jackson, 2023) transform the cinematic mother figure from an absent presence to a central and visible element of their stories. They also destabilize the white supremacy of the cinematic mother figure by presenting matrifocal narratives of a Cree mother (Niska, *Night Raiders*), a Chinese American immigrant mother (Evelyn, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and African American mothers (Mack and Evelyn, *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). These films subvert the cinematic tradition of representing motherhood in crisis by locating the crisis outside of motherhood (*Night Raiders*), presenting crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than solely her children (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and rejecting crisis in favour of a meditative, poetic approach to motherhood (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). By employing a matrifocal approach to narrative, cinematography, and editing, each film pushes against monstrous mother tropes that are pervasive in North American cinema. Finally, by presenting positive images of mothers that deviate from normative motherhood, both in identity and in practices, the films also render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Adrienne Rich.*

Introduction: Cinema and Motherhood in Crisis

In *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, E. Ann Kaplan writes: “The Mother was in [a] sense everywhere—one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her—but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration” (3). Examining the connection between nineteenth-century literary mothers and their twentieth-century onscreen counterparts, Kaplan locates the cinematic mother figure as an absent presence (3). Present yet often relegated to the margins of the image or narrative (or both), the cinematic mother is also historically a site of crisis (Fischer 30). Lucy Fischer, in her seminal text *Cinematernity*, observes how mothers are blamed for the impact of their transgressions on their children: the mother’s sins are passed down to their child, the mother fails in their role by raising a deviant child, or the mother’s experience of birthing and raising children is defined by “hysteria and anxiety” (30). Publishing this work in the late 1990s, Fischer notes that some filmmakers had begun to recentre the mother and offer narratives pushing against this patriarchal equation of motherhood and crisis.

Using Kaplan’s and Fischer’s texts as an entry point, I examine how motherhood and crisis are represented in contemporary North American cinema. I analyze three films released in North America between 2021 and 2023: *Night Raiders* (Goulet), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan and Scheinert), and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* (Jackson). Employing matrifocal narratives, each of these films subverts the historical screen representation of motherhood as a site of crisis in three distinct ways. *Night Raiders* offers a nuanced perspective of motherhood in crisis by locating the source of this crisis in systemic colonial violence, whereas *Everything Everywhere All at Once* depicts crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than as something inflicted upon her children. Furthermore, it celebrates crisis as part of the messy, complex nature of the mother role and the mother-daughter relationship. *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*, meanwhile, refuses to depict motherhood in crisis. Instead, it offers an intricate and peaceful meditation on the experience of mothering.

I begin my examination of these films by laying a theoretical groundwork that bridges theories of motherhood with theories of cinema and media. I position the concepts of matrifocality (O’Reilly), the institution of motherhood (Rich), and controlling images (Collins) with the monstrous mother (Palko) and the cinematic good-bad mother dichotomy (with particular attention to the subgenre of mommy horror) (Arnold). I then discuss the significance of each film and present their matrifocal narratives of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) mothers: a Cree mother (Niska from *Night Raiders*), a Chinese American immigrant mother (Evelyn from *Everything Everywhere*

All at Once), and African American mothers (Mack and Evelyn from *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). Portraying these mothers with positivity, nuance, and care, these films destabilize the white supremacy of the institution of motherhood. I also briefly note the importance of the films' respective critical reception and popular praise upon release. I then chart how each film subverts the traditional representation of motherhood in crisis. I conclude that by presenting positive images of mothers deviating from normative motherhood (in identity and practices), these films render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Adrienne Rich. Furthermore, by employing a matrifocal approach to narrative, cinematography, and editing, each film pushes against monstrous mother tropes that are pervasive in North American cinema.

Centring the Mother: Institutions, Images, and Monsters

Coined by Andrea O'Reilly, a matrifocal narrative "is one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance" (O'Reilly and Green 16). The term "matrifocal," drawn from the work of Miriam Johnson, describes an approach to mothers and motherhood that is valuable and central to the operation of things (qtd. in O'Reilly and Green 226). For the societies Johnson studied, the image of the mother was "culturally elaborated and valued" (qtd. in O'Reilly and Green 226). Mothers, however, were also central to these societies' economic and governmental structures. Matrifocality, therefore, necessarily includes centring motherhood culturally and structurally. Applying this to narratives, O'Reilly asserts that matrifocal narratives infuse motherhood both in theme and plot structure (O'Reilly and Green 16). In so doing, matrifocal narratives highlight the value of experiences of motherhood and practices of mothering.

Rich separates these experiences of motherhood from what she calls the "institution of motherhood." "The institution," she argues, "aims at ensuring that [mothers'] potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (60). Rich refers to the institution as a pillar of our broader social, political, and cultural systems. The institution primarily serves to support, and is thus upheld by, patriarchy because it works to control how, where, when, and why women mother (as a practice and role). Rich's theorization of the institution can be further deepened when considering race, class, and sexuality. Colonialism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity mobilize the institution of motherhood to harm mothers who inhabit marginalized identities. Patricia Hill Collins's work on controlling images helps to understand how the institution uses forms of media to harm marginalized mothers.

Collins defines controlling images as those that mobilize negative stereotypes to "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice

appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69). Collins discusses controlling images specifically about the treatment of Black women in media. Stereotypes such as the mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and hot momma are used as justification for the oppression of Black women (Collins 69). Collins writes that elite groups, who are made elite by white supremacism and colonial structures, recognize the power in defining societal values and, as such, exploit existing symbols and create new ones to manipulate ideas about Black women (69). One form of a controlling image is that of the monstrous mother.

Abigail Palko describes the monstrous mother as part of a narrative that deforms the experience and perception of motherhood by exerting “external pressure on mothers and their mothering practices” (639). The trope of the monstrous mother simultaneously locates social anxieties within mother figures and absolves the external community of supporting mothering practices (640). Palko importantly specifies that contemporary versions of the monstrous mother “are highly racialized and classed,” which, in turn, reflects social anxieties about who is allowed to be a mother or is capable of mothering (640). Another function of contemporary monstrous motherhood that Palko notes is the role of surveillance. In addition to people’s eyes, there is now a camera lens on every corner. From smartphones to home and business security cameras, the possibility of being recorded and labelled as a “bad mother” for deviating from normative mothering practices (as defined by the institution) is extremely high. Cinema, as an audio-visual medium, is another avenue through which controlling images of the good and bad mother uphold the expectations of the institution of motherhood.

Sarah Arnold examines the function of the good mother and bad mother in post-1960s American horror cinema. While the mother figure is present across genres, horror cinema in particular boasts enough depictions of monstrous mothers to warrant a subgenre called “mommy horror.” Arnold determines that horror cinema is interested in the mother “as a site of both fascination and repulsion” (1). Through this dichotomy, horror cinema perpetuates an idealized or essential motherhood (Arnold 4; Harrington 213). This is also referred to as normative motherhood, which is based on a conception of mothers as “white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, married, and in a nuclear family with usually one to two children” (O’Reilly 629). O’Reilly identifies ten dictates of normative motherhood; they include placing maternity at the core of female identity, relegating motherwork to the home, identifying motherwork as the individual responsibility of the mother alone, advocating that maternity is inherently natural to all women, and believing mothering is private and nonpolitical (O’Reilly 629). Any mothers who deviate from these expectations, in practice and identity (such as racialized, queer, trans, nonbinary, single, and nongestational), are inherently

abnormal and therefore bad or monstrous. As a result of cinema's historic perpetuation of normative motherhood and its impossible-to-achieve standards, onscreen mothers and motherhood are often "ambivalently framed as always-already monstrous" (Harrington 215).

BIPOC Matrifocality and Disrupting the Institution of Motherhood

Each of the chosen films is significant, as they provide matrifocal narratives for mothers of marginalized identities. These mothers are portrayed with positivity, nuance, and care. None of them are eternally condemned for their mothering practices or depicted as total failures in their roles as mothers. These films, therefore, inherently destabilize the white supremacy of the institution of motherhood, which is even more significant considering that each received critical and/or popular praise upon their release. *Night Raiders* was selected for several film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival, and received multiple Canadian film accolades. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was globally successful at the box office and won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actress for Michelle Yeoh's portrayal of Evelyn. *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* also played the festival circuit, including the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, and was nominated for numerous awards, including Best First Feature at the 2024 Independent Spirit Awards. The fact that these films received this kind of reception for stories depicting racialized mothers within a good mother framework is something to be celebrated; this, however, is just the surface. My analysis demonstrates how each of these films uses narrative and form to render the institution of motherhood visible, pushing against traditional cinematic images of monstrous mothers.

Motherhood Forced into Crisis: Matrifocal Narrative and Systems of Oppression in *Night Raiders*

Night Raiders subverts the cinematic tradition of motherhood in crisis by employing a matrifocal narrative that locates the source of this crisis in systemic colonial violence. Set in a future North America, the film follows Niska (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers), a Cree woman navigating the aftermath of a fictional civil war with her daughter, Waseese (Brooklyn Letexier-Hart). The two live in the woods outside the city to evade the military occupation, a de facto representation of colonial power that forces all children to attend its state-run institutions. Referencing the histories of residential schools, these institutions violently force assimilation and erase all cultural knowledge and memory from these children.

The beginning of the film formally positions the audience to follow Niska's perspective. In the opening scene, Waseese becomes injured in a bear trap. After they get back to their trailer, the camera focusses solely on Niska. A series of medium long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups follow her as she tends to a feverish Waseese. Many of these shots are also longer takes, allowing us to sit with Niska in real time as she enacts her mothering practice. The camera continues to follow her as a whirring sound indicates an incoming military drone. Niska warns Waseese and runs outside to shoot down the drone, the camera keeping her in the centre frame. As she aims towards the sky, the camera shifts to a low-angle shot that leaves Niska in the foreground and highlights the drone in the deepest plane of the image. This scene is the film's first indication that Niska's motherhood is in crisis at the hands of colonial violence. By centring Niska visually, we are positioned to follow her experience of mothering alongside her. Thus far, her mothering has predominantly been a response to physical manifestations (read: crises) of colonial violence—that is, the bear trap and the surveillance drone. The film continues to locate this crisis of motherhood in colonial violence through its narrative.

Waseese's injury worsens with an infection. There is no way to access the required medicine within the city without getting caught and revealing Waseese's evasion of the state-run schools. Niska is forced to choose between keeping Waseese—risking her death—or giving her up to the state; in other words, continuing to mother Waseese on her terms or relinquishing her practice of mothering to the state. Once again, Niska's motherhood is in crisis, not because the objective role of motherhood is inherently in crisis but because colonial powers have forced her into an impossible situation. Roberta, an old friend who gave up her son to the state, says to Niska: "You looked after her when she needed her mother most. Do you really want her to be stuck here? We have no way out, but not her. My son has so much more there than I can ever give him here. More than Waseese can ever have here." Due to Waseese's worsening illness, Niska relents and alerts nearby authorities to the presence of a minor outside the school walls. Here, the schools and military government represent the institution of motherhood. In terms of their postwar society, Niska is a bad mother for raising her daughter outside of their mandated curriculum and environment. She is also a bad mother, however, for abandoning her daughter to the state, knowing that they will lose contact. Akin to the tradition of motherhood in crisis on screen, Niska is punished for deviating from the institution's definition of a good mother. Instead of this being the film's climax, however, this is how it begins; throughout the rest of the film, we see Niska try to find and eventually rescue Waseese from the school. By depicting the impossibility of Niska's choice and maintaining her perspective in her journey back to Waseese, the film makes clear that Niska's

motherhood is in crisis because of the colonial systems working against her. Blame and judgment are not placed on her as a mother but rather on the systems of violence that oppress her.

By employing a matrifocal narrative, *Night Raiders* trades colonial images of Indigenous mothers as monstrous for more authentic, nuanced images of Indigenous mothers as complex and valued figures. Reflecting on how colonialism functions against Indigenous communities, Sarah Carter and Myra Rutherdale note how Indigenous mothers were immediately constructed by white settler societies as “lacking in discipline, promiscuous, and in need of training” (qtd. in Brant and Anderson 774). Narratives that Indigenous women were unfit and uncivilized were developed to demean and demonize Indigenous mothers, thereby justifying the colonial project (Brant and Anderson 774). *Night Raiders* rejects these types of controlling images by portraying Niska as capable, resourceful, and always prioritizing her daughter’s needs—the opposite of these stereotypes. The film’s matrifocality, therefore, pushes against colonial narratives of monstrosity by demonstrating how Indigenous mothering must “be understood within a deep, tangled, and complicated history of genocidal attacks on those who physically, culturally, and spiritually give life to the people” (Brant and Anderson 782).

Furthermore, Niska’s perspective, and subsequently her motherhood, is central to the film’s plot structure. Aside from two scenes depicting Waseese’s experience at the school, the audience spends the majority of the film with Niska. At the film’s end, it becomes clear that Niska’s deeper purpose was to deliver Waseese to an Indigenous community that remained (relatively) free from the military occupation. Waseese is determined to be the guardian about whom this community’s elders had prophesied. The plot, therefore, does not exist without Niska’s motherhood. It is her role as Waseese’s mother and her journey in raising and rescuing Waseese that moves the story forward; without Niska, there is no Waseese and no guardian. As such, spectators cannot avoid or cast off the portrayal of Niska’s motherhood. We are positioned to witness the nuance of Niska’s mothering practices and the complexity of her experience of motherhood against the violence of systemic colonialism.

Crisis as Maternal Experience: Matrifocal Form, Point of View, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Everything Everywhere All at Once displaces the tradition of motherhood in crisis by portraying it as something experienced by a mother rather than only inflicted upon her children. The film also celebrates crisis as a natural part of the messy, complex nature of mothering and mother-daughter relationships. The film follows Evelyn, an owner of a laundromat, a daughter, a wife, and (most significantly) a mother. The audience meets Evelyn in a general state of

crisis. Her business is under threat of closure from an endless tax audit; her dismissive elderly father is now under her care at home due to his failing health; her husband cannot seem to keep up with the demands of their business and home life; and her relationship with her daughter is strained to the point of breaking. It is not just Evelyn's role as a mother that is in crisis but also her role as a wife, daughter, and business owner. As the narrative continues, we discover Evelyn is at the centre of a multiverse tied to her existence, and that she must fight a supernatural villain who threatens to destroy every universe in its wake. Since the plot centres around Evelyn, the narrative is already matrifocal and allows us to experience Evelyn's crisis from her perspective. The film goes further, however, by employing matrifocality in cinematography and editing to visually and audibly position the audience in Evelyn's point of view.

When Evelyn decides to first enter the multiverse, the camera is positioned in a medium close-up of her face. The camera is in shallow focus, allowing the background to blur and drawing the eyes of spectators to Evelyn in the centre frame. Evelyn engages the multiverse by clicking her earpiece. As her facial expression changes, the music fades into a mechanical synth and the camera's focus deepens the field of view behind Evelyn. The audience's visual and audible experience transforms alongside Evelyn's. In the next shot, Evelyn is magically pulled backwards with extreme force and speed. She remains in the centre of the frame as we watch her chair zoom through the tax office into a nearby custodian's closet. As Evelyn's world flies past her, so too does it fly by us as spectators. We also hear her muffled scream throughout, attaching us visually and audibly to Evelyn's perspective. As Evelyn crashes through the closet door, the frame splits into two parts: on the left side, we see Evelyn at the auditor's desk; on the right, we see Evelyn in the custodian's closet. The centre of the image blends each side, fracturing Evelyn's body into two separate yet simultaneous spaces. By presenting multiple Evelyns in one image, the film visually represents how she inhabits several roles beyond being a mother: a wife, a business owner, a daughter, an immigrant, a taxpayer, and a citizen. In other words, the film visually supports the narrative's assertion that Evelyn is more than just a mother. By centring Evelyn visually in the frame and generating the audio from her perspective, the film also employs matrifocality in its form. We are not only attuned to Evelyn's perspective narratively; we also see and hear what she sees and hears, experiencing the world as she does. Therefore, as Evelyn experiences crisis—in her motherhood, in her marriage, in her business—we, too, experience it as she does. In this way, the film presents crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than just her children. The film deepens this with its depiction of Evelyn's complicated relationship with her daughter, Joy.

At the film's start, it is clear that Evelyn and Joy are in conflict. One of Joy's first lines of dialogue is a warning to her girlfriend, Becky, for how Evelyn may speak to them: "I'm just telling you now in case my mom says something dumb, like you're fat or whatever." As the story progresses, it is revealed that the villain destroying the multiverse is an alternate version of Joy, originally known as Alpha Joy. Their first confrontation reveals the source of Alpha Joy's discontent:

Alpha Joy: I got bored one day and put everything on a bagel. Everything. All my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dog, every last personal ad on Craigslist. Sesame. Poppy seed. Salt. And it collapsed in on itself. 'Cause, you see, when you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this: the truth.

Evelyn: What is the truth?

Alpha Joy: Nothing matters.

Evelyn: No, Joy. You don't believe that.

Alpha Joy: Feels nice, doesn't it? If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt you feel for making nothing of your life—it goes away.

As the dialogue reveals, the heart of the film's conflict is not simply the strained relationship between Evelyn and Joy. Instead, their experiences of crisis are mirrored in each other; both mother and daughter feel the impossible weight of failure placed on them. Alpha Waymond (a multiverse version of Evelyn's husband) initially tries to blame this on Alpha Evelyn, explaining that she pushed Alpha Joy beyond her mind's limits. Alpha Joy later tells Evelyn, "I know the joy and the pain of having you as my mother." Ultimately, however, Alpha Joy's pain is not located solely in her experience of being mothered. Evelyn comes to realize that she, too, shares all the same pain from her relationship with her father. Therefore, it is not inherently motherhood that is causing the film's conflict as much as it is the complexity of defining one's identity against clashing cultural, societal, and familial expectations. The film's attention to this complexity of defining oneself also highlights Evelyn's maternal ambivalence.

Sarah LaChance Adams defines maternal ambivalence as "the simultaneous and contradictory emotional responses of mothers towards their children—love and hate, anger and tenderness, pity and cruelty, satisfaction and rage" (LaChance Adams 613–14). One of the key orientations of this ambivalence is the conflict a mother experiences when she feels tension and opposition towards her children. This tension and opposition are a result of the mother's loss of their identity before motherhood. In her second confrontation with Alpha Joy, Evelyn declares, "I still know who I am." After spending time in

the multiverse and seeing all the various facets of her identity, the hopes and interests and possibilities of self, in addition to her motherhood, Evelyn can reaffirm her sense of self. By exploring the endless versions of herself, Evelyn is reacquainted with the “bodily integrity, freedom of movement, guilt-free work time, recreation ... and alone time” that she lost in motherhood (LaChance Adams 616). Evelyn’s affirmation defies the expectation set by the institution of motherhood that she is only a mother and nothing else.

Furthermore, by formally aligning audiences with Evelyn through cinematography and editing, the film positions them to embrace Evelyn’s perspective and root for her success. The film, therefore, encourages its spectators to celebrate both Evelyn’s maternal ambivalence and her defiance of the institution of motherhood, which is further cemented in the film’s ending. The penultimate scene shows Evelyn and Joy in every universe, with Evelyn trying to rescue Joy from destroying herself. The fight ceases as we return to the regular universe. While Joy laments the pain she feels in her relationship with Evelyn, the film lets Evelyn have the last word. Framed again in a close-up with a shallow focus that highlights her against the blurred background, Evelyn says the following: “Maybe it’s like you said, maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that’ll make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always want to be here with you.” In this moment, the film acknowledges that “being a mother is emotionally and physically taxing and not always pleasant” (Harrington 214). By having Evelyn choose to embrace the crisis of her experience of motherhood—that is, the messy and sometimes painful experience of her mother-daughter relationship—the film explicitly presents this crisis, this ambivalence, as worthy of acceptance. By employing matrifocality in its form and thus positioning viewers to experience Evelyn’s crisis with her, the film transforms maternal ambivalence from something monstrous to something valid, natural, and meaningful.

Refusal of Crisis: Peaceful Meditations on Motherhood in *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*

All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt refuses to depict motherhood in crisis. Instead, it offers an intricate and peaceful meditation on the experience of mothering. The film follows Mack in her childhood, adulthood, and elder years in Mississippi. Narratively, the film employs matrifocality in depicting both Mack’s experience of being mothered and her own practices of mothering. One scene depicts a young Mack and her sister, Josie, spending time with their Grandma Betty. Throughout the scene, the camera remains still, and the frame shows only their hands. Grandma Betty’s hands are cupped, holding

pieces of clay dirt that Mack and Josie gradually take from her to eat. As they sit together, Grandma Betty shares this generational mothering practice with them:

Grandma Betty: My mom used to put a little bit of dirt in my hand. “This you,” she said.

Mack and Josie: This you, this you.

Grandma Betty: Dirt and water. Her mama had said the same to her. When it rain, it’s like it’s singing to you. You can smell it in the air. Taste the rain in the dirt.

Mack: Like earth?

Grandma Betty: Yeah, baby. Like earth. Rich. So rich.

This scene is one of many in which motherhood and mothering practices are central. Mack later mirrors this scene when she gives birth to Lily. With Josie at her side, Mack cradles the newborn and tells her, “You made of dirt, you know that? And water.” Matrilocality is further engaged by the plot’s nonlinear structure. The film slowly waltzes back and forth between different periods and spaces of Mack’s life. Each vignette is tied together by her experiences of motherhood and mothering, which is never portrayed in crisis.

Mothering practices are mirrored again in a sequence that compares Mack and her mother, Evelyn. The sequence begins with a close-up of Mack’s hands caressing her pregnant belly while she is in the bathtub. The sequence is crosscut with a memory of finding her mother on the ground in a rainstorm during her childhood. The sound is diegetic in both spaces, connecting the water from the running tap to the rain from the memory. It is eventually confirmed that this memory is of Evelyn’s untimely death. While her mother’s death is inherently sorrowful, the film does not present it as a sin or transgression—that is, Evelyn’s death does not translate into a narrative about her neglect or absence from her daughters’ lives. Instead, the crosscutting vignettes allow for a meditation on the relationship between mothering and grief. In a later sequence, we see Evelyn in the bathtub with Mack as a toddler. Again, the camera remains in close-up, moving across the tub as Evelyn washes Mack the way Mack later washes her belly. The mirroring of these scenes demonstrates how Evelyn’s mothering practices were passed down to her daughter, despite her passing at a young age.

The film’s refusal to depict motherhood in crisis is also deeply embedded in its presentation of othermothering. Collins defines othermothering, a central practice in Black communities, as the process by which “othermothers” help

biological mothers raise their children with “caring patterns that are culturally familiar” (qtd. in Kuroczycka Schultes and Vallianatos 793). In the third act, Mack has become pregnant but does not wish to be a mother. As Mack and Josie sit on the porch of their childhood home, Mack explains her choice: “I always knew she was yours. Even when I didn’t. I thought I could, but I can’t. And I know you can. She’d be good with you, Josie. I know that.” When Josie asks who this child will be to Mack, the camera cuts to a close-up of Mack again, caressing her pregnant belly. The camera then cuts back to a medium shot of both sisters as Mack replies: “My sister’s child.” The sisters remember their mother and then repeat the word “mama” to each other, as if in affirmation that both of them will be mothers to this child. The sequence ends with them resting on each other’s shoulders.

Mack’s refusal to be the primary caregiver for this child is not presented as a moment of crisis. Instead, the film allows her the space and time to affirm what kind of motherhood she feels is right for her. While there are conflicting emotions about the choice, particularly from the father of the child, no character passes judgment or shame on Mack. Although Mack experiences some sorrow about the life she and this man could have had together, she remains ultimately happy and confident in her choice, which the film makes clear in the penultimate scene. Mack and Lily are framed together in a medium close-up, sitting on the porch and watching the rain. A beautiful orchestral score quietly swells, eventually blending with the sound of the raindrops and Mack’s voice as she teaches Lily about forms of water. The scene offers a peaceful, poetic depiction of Mack and Lily’s relationship. In this way, the film subverts the cinematic tradition of motherhood in crisis and disrupts the institution of motherhood. Instead of offering the mother as primary caregiver in a heteronormative nuclear family, the film celebrates othermothering and communal mothering practices.

The film’s refusal to portray motherhood in crisis is further significant when considering the relationship between cinema and images of Black women. Returning to Collins, the dominant structures of white supremacy and colonialism have historically infused cinema with stereotypes of Black women, such as the mammy and the welfare queen. These images were used to vilify and thus control Black women in society. In response to this history, bell hooks discusses the oppositional gaze, in which Black viewers—and especially Black women—transform their act of looking (watching films) into a form of resistance (116). By refusing to identify with harmful representations of themselves on the screen, Black women fundamentally change the nature of cinematic spectatorship (as conceived by foregrounding film theorists). We can read writer and director Jackson’s refusal to perpetuate stereotypes and to depict Black motherhood in crisis as another response to this history. *All Dirt*

Roads Taste of Salt trades harmful controlling images of Black women for positive and authentic ones. From a perspective of motherhood, the film challenges controlling images of Black women as monstrous mothers with images of positive, authentic Black motherhood. Instead of the white supremacist, colonial forces Collins writes about, it is now Jackson who mobilizes the power of media to define societal values—in this case, presenting Black mothers as worthy, complex, and valuable.

Conclusion: The Moms Are, or Can Be, Alright

In the first chapter of her seminal book *Of Woman Born*, Rich asserts that she was haunted by the visual and literary media portraying motherhood as a singular identity built upon unconditional love for their children (72). Rich asks: “If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous?” (72). The films *Night Raiders*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* answer Rich’s question with a resounding “no.” By employing matrifocality in narrative and form, these films bring the experience of motherhood and practices of mothering to the forefront. They transform the cinematic mother figure from an absent presence to a central and visible element of their stories. They subvert the cinematic tradition of representing motherhood in crisis by locating the crisis outside of motherhood (*Night Raiders*), presenting crisis as something experienced by a mother rather than solely her children (*Everything Everywhere All at Once*), and rejecting crisis in favour of a meditative, poetic approach to motherhood (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). The matrifocality of these films and their subversions of motherhood in crisis also push against monstrous mother tropes, which are pervasive in cinema. By presenting positive images of mothers that deviate from normative motherhood, both in identity and in practices, the films render visible the absurdity and impossibility of the institution of motherhood as defined by Rich.

The analysis presented here is only a starting point into the rich possibilities that these films present. The cultural identities of each mother demand further examination beyond the scope of this article. For example, one could examine the role of elders and Indigenous mothering practices in *Night Raiders* and how the film presents Cree traditions against a colonial history and present. Another point of inquiry lies in the experience of mothering and being mothered for immigrant Chinese mothers and their first-generation Chinese American children in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. And *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt* could be studied concerning its exploration of mothering and communal responsibility in Black communities in the American South. These films are rich with possibility and serve as proof of

the power of matrifocality in cinema; for it is with these images, ones that refute the institution of motherhood and depict motherhood in all its nuance and complexity, that mothers can affirm they are not abnormal or monstrous—just human.

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