

'MAMA'S GUN': TRANSGRESSIVE NARRATIVES OF RACE, GENDER AND NATION  
IN POST CIVIL RIGHTS BLACK LITERATURE AND CULTURE

By

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To my sons, Akintunde and Ade

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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The figure of “mother” is a powerful and recurrent symbol in African-American literature and culture, particularly as a signifier of origins, tradition, family cohesion, strength and survival. Within the broader context of contemporary trans-racial political and social relations in the United States, however, the figurative “black mother” often signifies excess, pathology, victimization and monstrosity within hegemonic discourses of the family and the nation. While dominant groups have manipulated the latter symbolic economy as an ideological tool to enforce regressive and exclusionary practices along the lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality, African-American writers and artists continue to centralize black mothers and their critical concerns with issues of citizenship, decolonization, human and civil rights, social justice, and various nationalisms. With this framework in mind, my dissertation describes a transgressive maternal politics appearing in contemporary literature and culture that prioritizes black women as agents of transformative critiques of racial and gender hierarchies.

Specifically, I argue that as the promise of legislative and social reforms made during the Civil Rights era shifted in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, many narratives of “mother” in post-Civil Rights African-American literature and culture shifted toward mother figures who act as subjects through their *disruption* of gender categories and major claims to the American Dream. Through

themes of sexuality, desire, fertility and militancy, these mother figures offer alternative lenses through which to consider contemporary depictions of racialized mothers. Recent representations of these black mother figures respond to hegemonic ideologies regarding race, class, gender and sexuality that have historically relied upon images of the “good mother.” Of course, these representations are not without problems; they may be seen as reinforcing negative stereotypes about black women. Yet, I argue that the politics of respectability and cult of femininity that haunt black women silence the subjective viability of marginalized mothers. A radical maternal politics that rejects wholly idealized or pathologized mother figures as well as normative gender performance can be seen as one of many critical perspectives available to all women to negotiate ideologies of national belonging, citizenship, freedom, and social justice.

CHAPTER 1  
MAMA'S GUN: 'DEFIANCE THAT HEALS'

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is not mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

-- bell hooks

This dissertation is about black maternal figures and their multiple and often conflicting symbolic functions in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. culture. Mama, Mami, Mummy, Ma, Big Mama, M'Dear, Sweet Mama, Baby Mama, Hootchie Mama and Mama-nem. These names – some terms of endearment, others terms of derision – conjure spectacular signs of blackness; mothers whose difference stands in stark relief from the imagined, idealized child-bearers of the nation – white, married, heterosexual, and feminine. These names also invoke the figurative alterity of black womanhood – what cultural critic Ann DuCille calls “the quintessential site of difference” – the ultimate sign of what it means to be symbolically, ideologically and materially left outside of the American enterprise. Yet, it is from the outside, from the margins and borders, that black women have developed multiple critical perspectives to evaluate, interrogate and radically shape each location of their intersectional identities, influencing what it means to be to be black, to be women, to be American. Therefore, this dissertation also is about marginalized voices, about black women intellectuals, writers and artists who have, through their various expressive modes, shaped the contours of contemporary U.S. culture and critical theory. Narratives of race, gender and nation have long formed the foundation for notions of political and economic citizenship, civil and human rights, and social belonging. How black women intellectuals, writers and artists navigate and manipulate these dominant narratives will be explored in a number of literary and cultural sites throughout this project. Ultimately, I identify

recurring literary features that “talk back” to these dominant narratives through a trope I call “mama’s gun,” a term that draws upon black vernacular epistemologies and highlights the generative possibilities of various subversive incarnations of the black mother figure in contemporary culture.

To be sure, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and millennial American culture embraces non-traditional images of motherhood more than ever. The increasing visibility of single mothers, for example, demonstrates a new acceptance of women who raise children without husbands. In her study *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*, Jane Juffer traces how single mothers have gone from the embodiment of the failure of the American family to exemplars of self-sufficiency and, in a remarkable political turn, even the symbolic standard bearers for neoliberal notions of “personal responsibility.” Certainly the growing social support for and acceptance of women who raise children outside of marriage is comforting, but this tolerance is not universal or equally distributed. Single mothers may be considered the norm at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they are still more likely than other women to face intense poverty, job discrimination and domestic violence. Furthermore, non-white single mothers in the United States still bear a racialized and sexualized stigma that marks them as intruders upon the “imagined community” of the American republic.<sup>1</sup> Within the broader context of trans-racial political and social relations in the United States, the figurative “black mother” has come to signify excess, pathology, victimization and monstrosity within hegemonic discourses of the family and the nation. The racialized, sexualized and class-based entrenchment around black motherhood is exemplified by remarks made about First Lady Michelle Obama during the historic 2008 presidential campaign of her husband, President Barack Obama. During that campaign, news producers for FOX network repeatedly used a stigmatizing caption that read

“Obama’s Baby Mama” to refer to Michelle Obama, the Ivy-league educated attorney married to Barack Obama and mother of their two daughters, Malia and Sasha.

The term “baby mama” emerges from hip-hop music and African-American culture to define a woman who is not married nor attached to the father or fathers of her children. She is also thought of as a woman who uses sex to maintain financial or emotional control over the father or fathers. It is a racially and sexually loaded slang term that has slipped into mainstream American popular culture largely through daytime talk shows, such as *Jerry Springer* and *Maury Povich*. Often on those television programs, black men publically lambaste the mothers of their children for “infractions” such as dating someone new or requiring child support payments, as if these actions should be unheard of for a mother. Under these circumstances, the women, almost always young, black or Latina, and from working-class or poor backgrounds, seem emotionally uncontrollable, promiscuous, irresponsible and nagging. Through these televised exchanges, audiences are instructed to objectify the “baby mama” as a specific kind of single mother – racially, sexually and economically marginalized and generally unfit for her maternal duties.<sup>2</sup>

The “baby mama” is not seen as the domestic intellectual that Juffer describes. Instead, she is part of an intricate network of “controlling images,” to borrow the lexicon of black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, which define and reproduce regressive attitudes about black womanhood.<sup>3</sup> More than simply stereotypes, controlling images are an exercise of power used by dominant groups to manipulate attitudes about those who are not thought to be suitable for inclusion into mainstream structures of power and privilege. Controlling images are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins 69). Controlling images act as a “regulatory ideal,” in the Foucaultian sense, in that they have the power to produce or enact what

it seems only to name. This productive power functions through a number of cultural institutions such as the church, the university, the media, and the family.

The labeling of Michelle Obama as a baby mama is an example of the linguistic power of controlling images. Despite the fact that she does not fit the description of the baby mama nor is she a participant in the hip-hop culture from which the term emerges, FOX News producers chose to characterize her in that way. The notoriously conservative and bigoted network had for months sought to undermine Barack Obama's candidacy, and using the phrase presented an opportunity to take aim at his wife's image.<sup>4</sup> The racial slur was widely denounced, and FOX News producers quickly apologized, but the effect and intent was clear: to render the wife of the first African-American man to receive a major party nomination for the seat of president as unfit for the position of First Lady. Despite Michelle Obama's professional accomplishments, her long and loving marriage and her well mannered children, her status as a black woman, a black mother, was enough to make her the target for the denigrating term. The term baby mama operated in that situation as a politically expedient technique to undercut her worthiness to represent the nation as the preeminent example of respectable womanhood.

Yet, weeks later the nation was informed that the unmarried, teenage daughter of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was six-months pregnant. Though Bristol Palin had unprotected sex and conceived a child out of wedlock with her teenage boyfriend, she was never called a baby mama on FOX News because she is white. Regardless of the circumstances of her maternity, Bristol Palin's legitimacy as a young woman poised to represent one of the nation's most esteemed families was sheltered from attack because of her race and class status. The inconsistency between the terminologies used for Obama and Palin stages a long-standing tension regarding racialized mother figures in the United States, because

in the race-bounded economy the mother is a maker and marker of boundaries, a generator of liminality, both vertically and horizontally. She is forced across a border, or she is prohibited from crossing a border; in either case her function is to reproduce, through offspring, the life of that border.” (Doyle 27)

In this case, the boundary between inclusion and exclusion into the highest echelons of power in the United States is marked by incongruous racialized maternal imagery.

Since the dawn’s early light broke the horizon line of America’s pluralist promise, black women have used their voices to illuminate the contradictions in the ideology and practice of freedom and justice for all, and, against tremendous obstacles, they have staked their claims to the privileges of the American Dream. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, African-American texts that depict prominent maternal figures, particularly those written by black women, often demonstrate this critical concern with inclusion and recognition through an attention to issues of citizenship, decolonization, human and civil rights, social justice, and reproductive freedom. In many cases, their literary efforts have necessarily involved participation in the rhetoric of respectable womanhood, setting forth the behaviors, actions and roles that women must execute, particularly the role of the “good mother.” In order to advance their aims for equality and social inclusion, black women writers have, at times, capitulated to these patriarchal domestic ideologies of good motherhood in public discourse. Domestic novels by black women during the post-Reconstruction period and turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplify what Claudia Tate calls “domestic allegories of political desire.” Novels such as *Iola Leroy* by Frances Watkins Harper (1892) and *Contending Forces* by Pauline E. Hopkins (1900) centralized the heroines’ quest for marriage, motherhood and bourgeois family formation in order to illustrate that black Americans were indeed ready for membership in the American enterprise.

In some ways, my description of the Michelle Obama-FOX News incident participates in this history; I defended Obama’s womanhood by offering a checklist of her respectable qualities.

My argument, shared by others who critiqued FOX News, relies on the fact that Michelle Obama is not single, young, and poor or an unwed mother, therefore she does not have the qualities of a baby mama. But what about the women who do? What kinds of claims to social and economic citizenship and political recognition are available for black mothers who are far from respectable? Are black mothers who subvert the normative expectations of the “good mother” worthy of voice in the public sphere or the privilege of representational coherence?

Through an examination of the work of a number of writers, performers, and literary and cultural critics, this project considers the critical possibilities and limitations of non-normative maternal figures in African-American literature and culture, which I identify as transgressive maternal figures.<sup>5</sup> African-American literary and cultural history is replete with recurring mother figures that would be considered transgressive for a number of reasons. Some critics might even argue that the black female subject is always already symbolically “outside” normative models of womanhood and motherhood, no matter how mainstream or respectable her representation seems, and therefore, is always transgressive. I do not disagree, yet I assert that a shift has occurred in *how* the recurring “outside” of black mother figures creates meaning within the specific political, economic, and social realities of late capitalist America. Black maternal figures operate as narrative focal points in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by moving from what I call a *politics of inclusion* to a *politics of transgression*. In the latter mode, maternal figures transgress dominant, exclusive ideologies of race, gender, and bourgeois motherhood through depictions of outlaw family structures, queer sexualities and desire, deviant and violent pregnancies, which offers alternative lenses through which to examine the symbolic economy of “mother” across a number of intersecting identity locations. The literary and cultural productions I explore in this project are as follows: *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones (1975), *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

(1982), *Dawn* by Octavia Butler (1987), *PUSH* by Sapphire (1996), and the recent performances and writings of actors Tyler Perry and RuPaul.

In *Mama's Gun*, I posit inclusion and transgression as two critical perspectives through which African-American literary traditions have negotiated ideologies of national belonging, citizenship, freedom, and social justice through black maternal figures. By choosing the maternal figures that are featured prominently in this project I resist the impulse to discount them as simply negative reflections of black life. To be sure, they are not characters that are traditionally studied from a maternal standpoint, and the things that they do or are done to them narratively are not particularly positive. Yet, I think it is important to investigate these kinds of maternal figures precisely because they are outsiders in motherhood studies. I think it is meaningful to explore how these narratives function against the social and political backdrop in which they were written. What might the outsider have to say about the inside? How might she “talk back?” However, I am also not willing to suggest that these depictions are without their representational problems or that they form comprehensive studies of black women’s agency, empowerment or rebellion in literature. They do not. The maternal figures I study are transgressive and compelling for their particular negotiation of boundary-crossing identity, which I see as an intervention into and possible mediation between dominant and marginalized discourses that centralize black women’s multiple conceptions of gender and sexuality. I think of *mama’s gun* as a term for these transgressive possibilities.

Furthermore, I conclude that as a literary trope, *mama’s gun* can also be used to identify contributions of black women intellectuals, artists, and writers to contemporary feminist critiques of gender. White feminist scholar Judith Butler, for example, suggests that contemporary feminist theory must “undo gender” by accepting it as a historical category, contingent on

historical and cultural framing of sexual difference. To do so will necessarily shift the aims of mainstream feminist activism toward revising “restrictively normative conceptions of gendered life,” which she identifies as a radical site of contemporary feminist work aimed toward social justice (1). I argue that black feminist and womanist scholars already implement some of these radical approaches in their work on the historical dynamic of womanhood, motherhood and power, and reproductive politics. Gender analysis is an active and vibrant hallmark of black feminist and womanist intellectual work.

In this introductory chapter, I will describe my methodology for approaching the major texts in my study, including detail on the terms I am using throughout the project as well as an explanation of the origins of the mama’s gun trope and the possibilities and limits of its use. I will also provide a review of the major black feminist, womanist and feminist texts in the area of motherhood studies that also serve as a foundation for my analysis. Finally, I will offer a brief outline of the four chapters of this project.

### **Methods and Terminology**

My approach to this project employs contemporary African-American literary theory, as well as black feminist, womanist and feminist interpretative frameworks. In addition to these major methodological foundations, I draw upon theories of performativity and queer theory to delineate my claims. I will describe influential aspects of each theoretical location before explaining my development and use of the term “mama’s gun.” By mapping these critical gestures, I hope to make transparent the route taken toward particular conclusions drawn in this project.

At the heart of my analysis is the assertion that there is a discursive relationship between historical, material realities and the production of cultural texts. I argue that black writers and performers, regardless of their gender, create texts that feature mother figures that either

explicitly or implicitly converse with a matrix of collective historical realities affecting black women.<sup>6</sup> Particularly salient to my approach is critic Houston A. Baker Jr.'s assertion that black texts are rooted in communal African-American historical experience, beginning with enslavement but also extending to post-emancipation social inequalities, Jim Crow economic and political disenfranchisement, as well as the ascendancy of the black middle class in the last 30 years. Baker uses these historical frameworks to describe how various realities have been generative of particular critical perspectives regarding African-American literature, and how those perspectives have changed episodically as social conditions shift. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Baker draws on Thomas Kuhn's notion of the paradigm to mark the major changes in the study of African-American letters, which he calls "generational shifts" (179). Baker begins by describing what he calls "integrationist poetics" of the 1950s, which are marked by optimism toward the promise of equality; an optimism that would then "translate into the literary domain" (180). Literary critics of the time asserted that as the nation worked toward integration, the black writer would be relieved of the burden of writing about his difference, and instead be regarded as a product of a homogenous American identity.

However, as aspiring African Americans faced the reality of violent, white supremacist opposition to their strivings for equality, integrationist poetics were soon replaced by the Black (Power) Aesthetic of the 1960s. Baker identifies this period as an inversion of the critical stance of the preceding generation. Rather than issuing a hopeful call for the dissolution of racial particularity in literature, critics of this period sought to "foster the uniqueness and authenticity of black expression" (183). Baker attributes this inversion to the dashing of the integrationist promise of the 1950s. Finally, Baker identifies a third generational shift, which he identifies as the "reconstructionist" or "professionalist" critical stance of the 1970s and 1980s. Critics of this

generation sought to distinguish themselves through a mode of analysis that radically disassociated literature and culture. In this mode, meaning was said to emerge from a “non-social, non-institutional medium,” and critics of black literature sought to evaluate texts through the use of theoretical interpretive frameworks outside of black culture. Baker attributes this particular generational shift to the rise of a “new black middle class” that “adopted postures, standards and vocabularies of their white counterparts” (196). In other words, Baker asserts that reconstructionists engaged in a kind of intellectual mimicry that paralleled the rising class aspirations of black academic critics, and their stance may in fact be part of a backlash against the ideology of the Black (Power) aesthetes, who centralized the concerns of poor and working-class blacks (206).

Baker convincingly problematizes the reconstructionist theoretical stance by arguing that their attention to language as “outside” of the realm of the social ultimately denies that language is itself a social institution. As a result, Baker claims that language cannot be evaluated or analyzed as independent from the social worlds it creates, organizes, and disciplines. As an alternative, Baker advocates an investigative approach that acknowledges the “serious literary-theoretical endeavors” of the reconstructionists, but, more important, must holistically contextualize literature through an interdisciplinary framework. He writes that

The contextualization of a work of literary or verbal art, from the perspective of the anthropology of art is an ‘interdisciplinary’ enterprise in the most contemporary sense of that word. Rather than ignoring (or denigrating) the research and insights of scholars in the nature, social, and behavioral sciences, the anthropology of art views such efforts as positive, rational attempts to comprehend the full dimensions of human behavior. And such efforts serve the literary-theoretical investigator as guides and contributions to an understanding of the symbolic dimensions of human behavior that comprise Afro-American literature and verbal art. (213)

Therefore, critical to my methodology is an attention to the intersection of socio-political context and the development of literary meaning supported by Baker’s call. My methodology differs,

however, in two significant ways. First, the socio-historical narrative that I use is marked differently than Baker's; I describe only one major shift in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, rather than the three generational approaches that he highlights. Secondly, I insist on centralizing the specificities of black women's collective, gendered experiences within African-American history rather than the male-centered narratives of black history that predominate Baker's approach. Taken together, my departures focus on a major shift occurring between the Civil Rights and the post Civil Rights periods and necessarily account for the particularities of black women's histories during that shift, specifically regarding their reproductive lives and politics. This framework shapes the meanings of the maternal figures I later explore in the cultural realm.

I use the Civil Rights era, marked from the end of World War II to the late 1960s, as an analytical landmark because of its significance as a moment in which African Americans made major socio-political gains toward their inclusion in the nation.<sup>7</sup> The struggle toward the milestones of legal desegregation of schools, public accommodations and the military as well as statutory protection of the franchise for black citizens formed the foundation for the belief in black inclusion in the promises of liberal democracy. It's the idea behind Martin Luther King, Jr.'s evocation of "a beloved community" in his 1957 speech "Birth of a New Nation." Drawing on the power of the recent independence of Ghana as a symbolic force for African Americans engaged in similar struggle, King predicts hopefully "an old order passing away and a new order coming into being. An old order of colonialism, of segregation, of discrimination is passing away now. And a new order of justice and freedom and goodwill is being born." (35) King's vision demonstrates that despite the physical and psychic violence delivered upon activists during the Civil Rights movement, the politics of inclusion, the belief in the possibility of "justice and freedom and goodwill" for black citizens, significantly marks this period.<sup>8</sup>

The literary output during this historic moment, particularly major works published by black women, engage in the politics of inclusion by locating the locus of subject formation and social belonging in the depiction of black mothers' unflinching pursuit of the American Dream through their desire for "house" and "home." Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) are examples. I contend that these works, despite their narrative and formal differences, share an inclusive politics in their depiction of the black mother figure's negotiation of American identity, which generally involves dreams of purchasing or building a home for her family. "House" and "home" in these texts function as an intersectional site of resistance against white supremacist ideologies that imagined working-class black women solely as caretakers in the homes of white families. The economic ascendancy of the United States as a world power depended on the labor of enslaved women and "free" black women who worked as domestics – women like my great-grandmothers – and this role became naturalized through the reiterated image of the Mammy. Therefore, for the central women characters in these texts, freedom was imagined through the heroine's quest to own a home.

Home exists in these narratives not only as the symbolic private sphere, where women produce a safe haven of affirmation, nurturance and healing for themselves and their children, but also in the public realm, as a literal house, a piece of privately owned property that signifies participation in the American enterprise and affords women a valuable material location from which assimilation and resistance commingle. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, for example, the efforts of the mother, Silla Boyce, to "buy house," are part of her resistance to her invisibility, her marginalization as a black, immigrant woman in the United States. To "buy house" is to

create a location for the nurturing of her family as well as a place to become a more visible part of her community. It is a double resistance. Silla's quest to "buy house" also problematizes readings of "home" solely as site of cloistered domesticity for women. In contrast to the ways house and home have operated in some white women's texts, black women's desire to "buy house" can also exist as a site of economic and political independence. In ways that are often associated with masculinity – a man's home is his castle – black women have also constructed identity around property ownership, and not just "keeping house." Within the ideology of the American Dream, to own a home is equated with citizenship and recognition in the social and economic life of the nation. In fact, the notion of social and political visibility in discourses of Western modernity relies upon John Locke's central notion of "life, liberty and property." For Silla, Maud, Vyvry, and Mama Lena, the mother's quest centers on a humanist vision of inclusion through property ownership that parallels the rising rhetoric of Civil Rights movement. Black women writers situated these black mother figures as subjects by insisting upon their inclusion as propertied members of the polis, rather than accepting their relegation as "mules of the world."

In the post-Civil Rights period, however, the luster of inclusion dimmed. Integrationist gains made during the Civil Rights movement were met by a number of structural responses aimed at maintaining a discriminatory and exploitative racial and class order. By the late 1960s, young black activists had begun to criticize the vision of inclusion advanced by King and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the NAACP and the Urban League, the mainstream civil rights organizations of the period. The youth response was "Black Power," described by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton as a rejection of

the assumption that the basic institutions of this society must be preserved. The goal of black people must not be to assimilate into middle-class America, for that class – as a

whole – is without a viable conscience as regards humanity. The values of the middle class permit the perpetuation of the ravages of the black community. (40)

Hopes for King’s beloved community faltered under the burden of violent attacks on civil rights activists, and by 1967 Carmichael and Hamilton articulated in their book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* the shifting political aspirations of millions of black people.

Meanwhile, hopes of inclusion were also undermined by changes in the nation’s cities. After the assassination of King, riots tore several major American cities apart and soon after “white flight” set in, leaving African Americans behind in blighted communities with little hope for jobs, decent housing, or education. The 1970s through the 1990s marked a period when black communities became increasingly fractured, particularly around beliefs about black cultural difference and potential for achievement. Rather than attributing the deterioration of urban America to unjust distribution of resources based on white supremacy, an old ideological debate intensified that centralized the “difference” of the black family from the white, nuclear ideal as the cause for disparity. As the black middle-class gained ground through strategic negations of racial or ethnic difference, many working-class and poor African Americans were left to bear the weight of these ideologies alone; their status as the national “other” marked them as unfit for true American identity.

Central to these developing tensions were old debates about welfare. Significantly, the 1965 Moynihan Report tied suggestions for federal welfare policy to social “science” on the black family. Moynihan’s project joined the work of black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier whose *The Negro Family in America* study also foregrounded the “pathology” of black women within black family structures. Political retrenchment against social welfare programs that would offer assistance to millions of women and children and a host of other regressive economic policies of the 1970s and 1980s relied upon the construction of black families as culturally outside the

norms of middle-class white standards, which is what Hortense Spillers alludes to memorably in the opening to her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar.” Spillers writes that “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (257). Her essay importantly describes how controlling images of black women have been iterated in a number of historical moments, and how these images have been necessary for the implementation of neoliberal social policy.<sup>9</sup>

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley describes the contemporary fallout of this political history in his book *Yo’ Mama’s DisFUNKtional! Fighting the Culture Wars in America*. Kelly points to a number of critics and analysts, such as Charles Murray, Dinesh D’Souza and William Julius Wilson, as beneficiaries of earlier theories that tie ethnicity to pathology and promote the idea that black life is wholly unfit to function within the standards of American propriety. Kelley argues that these analysts “snap on” – using a black vernacular idiom to mean “degrade” – black culture, which they cite as the basis for irresponsible and culturally deficient black people. The “cultural and ideological warfare that continues to rage over black people and the inner city as social problems” claims that blacks are hyper-criminal, hyper-sexual and hyper-reproductive (4). Importantly, Kelley identifies “the black mother” as a highly charged site for these arguments. To be sure, the ideology of black cultural inferiority has a longer history than the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the defeminization of black women has played a significant role in the framing of racist representations of all black people, but Kelley’s apprehension of the particular inflections of these arguments in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, post Civil Rights climate is significant to my project. Interestingly he writes that “I wrote this book quite literally in defense of my own mother and my two sisters” (4). I don’t imagine Kelley meant this statement in the paternalistic way that it could be read – as if his mother and sisters needed or required his chivalric male voice to speak

for them. I take this position because he goes on to say that he wrote the book as a “defense of black people’s humanity,” and I am intrigued by his centralization of “the merciless attack on black mothers” in the culture wars. By situating the representational force of black mothers in the post Civil Rights era political economy, he correctly calls attention to problematic narratives that affect entire communities of black women, men and children.

Within the realms of black cultural production, the post Civil Rights era seems marked by a stronger sense of ambivalence toward the politics of inclusion. In some cases, there has been a celebration of the upward mobility demonstrated by members of the black middle class, particularly in popular culture. The cultural phenomenon of *The Cosby Show*, for example, signaled to some that it was indeed possible for black folks – a nuclear family headed by not one, but two working professionals – to live just like idealized middle-class white people. Yet, for those locked out of the possibilities for upward mobility, a different representational norm emerged, one that did not proffer an image of multiracial harmony and respectable blackness. In these situations, a politics of transgression undergirded the art. Whether it was the rising signs and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement or the growth of hip-hop as a music form and culture, black cultural production from the late 1960s onward is marked by a number of disruptive gestures – a strident assertion of black identity that did not on its face appeal to the notion of acceptance within the national corpus. Likewise, as the promise of inclusion of the Civil Rights era gave way to new practices of social exclusion that relied upon black mothers as symbols of pathology, excess, and victimization, narratives of the black mother shifted toward figures who act as subjects through their *disruption* of the major claims to the American Dream. Neoliberal policies such as Reaganomics, “family values” rhetoric, and welfare and social underclass discourses put black mothers at odds with the American nationalist ideal, and as a result, black

mother figures appearing in major works of literature of the post Civil Rights era do not necessarily take up the mother's quest for house and home as earlier texts did. The texts I explore in this project share their concern with the subjectivities of black mother figures who in some way contest the inclusionist ideal through scenes of abjection, subversion and transgression.

Furthermore, I contend that the disruptive gestures in these texts were also aimed toward the "imagined community" articulated within Black Arts and black cultural nationalist traditions. Though Black Power politics, Black Arts aesthetics, and other expressions of black cultural nationalism rejected assimilation into the white majority through the reification of the cultural specificity of African Americans, this work often relied upon the conscription of black women, particularly black mothers, as problematic signifiers. The black mother figure – as are all mother figures in all nationalist expression – is the vehicle through which cultural specificity is transmitted. Her reproductive life, sexuality, domestic roles, femininity, and child-rearing are scrutinized and disciplined by a chauvinist order. Just as the Montgomery NAACP found teen mother Claudette Colvin unfit for role of "Mother of the Civil Rights" movement, black nationalist leaders regulated black women's roles in the struggle and in the family.

Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* offers the collective responses of dozens of black women to the simultaneous idealization and vilification of black womanhood by black men in revolutionary movements. In her essay "On the Issue of Roles," Bambara argues that freedom struggle should be toward the full and equal development of all members of the community and that

the opinions of outside 'experts' who love to explain ourselves to ourselves, [tell] the Black man that the matriarch is his enemy, [tell] black women through the mushrooming of b.c. clinics that too many children is the Black family's enemy. So he indulges in lost-balls fantasies and attempts to exact recompense by jumping feet foremost into her chest, and she starts conjuring up abandonment stories and ADC nightmares and leaps at his

throat. Now what is that but acting like we were just symbolic persona in some historical melodrama. Keep the big guns on the real enemy.

Here Bambara points to the ways specific discourses around reproduction, family life and motherhood trouble the revolutionary work necessary in black communities. In this passage, she subtly critiques matriarch studies a la Moynihan, the politics of birth control (b.c.) that specifically target black women, and issues in the dissemination of child support and welfare (ADC). These narratives, which come from “outside” black communities from “experts,” seep into the way of thinking within heterosexual male-dominated black nationalist political and artistic organizations doing violence to the goals of liberation for all. Revolutionary action, therefore, requires a resistance to the negative gender paradigms emerging from white society and reified in black communities. Her essay calls for a kind of radical gender transformation that pre-dates the theoretical work of contemporary feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, and, importantly, inflects her critique with the specificities of racialized maternal symbolism. Therefore, I argue that the politics of transgression that I am identifying with the post Civil Rights era occurs on at least two registers – disruption of both American nationalist and black nationalist ideologies of motherhood. The texts that I study are in conversation with those two politics.

Methodologically, my second significant detour from Baker’s “anthropology of art” approach is my centralization of interdisciplinary socio-historical narratives that figure women’s histories as primary vantage points for cultural expression. Baker’s work relies on a genealogical approach to black history read as a primarily male focused enterprise, and my project adds to this work the historical narratives of black women’s reproductive lives. Specifically, I draw upon the racialized histories of breeding, sterilization, birth control and reproductive technologies to inform my analysis. Particularities of these histories will be discussed and contextualized in each

chapter and related to other relevant social and political events. Black feminist literary criticism and womanist critical approaches are integral to this methodology. In many ways, I take up the mission expressed by Joanne Braxton in her introduction to *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* when she writes that her project is

an exploration of the ways in which Black women writers interpret their experience as they read the metaphors and symbols of the dominant and oftentimes oppressive culture that they rise within and against; it is also an analysis of codes and symbols which may be understood only within the Veil of Blackness and femaleness. (xxiv)

Braxton's use of the DuBoisian metaphor of "the Veil" here invokes the idea of double-consciousness, but the "two-ness" in this case is blackness and femaleness. By deploying this powerful and influential metaphor, Braxton reframes the critical conversation toward the racialized and gendered analysis performed by black women writers who use "experience" – individual and collective – to create meaning in their art. Braxton's statement privileges black women's voices in their response to DuBois's rhetorical question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois 2-3)

The black feminist literary critic focuses on, in part, the way black women have answered this question, highlighting in their analysis not only the "two-ness" of race and gender, but also the intersections of sexuality, class and ethnicity. The work of Hortense Spillers, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson and Karla F.C. Holloway, in particular, have been essential to my project for their critical attention to the voices of insurgent maternal figures within the African American literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> I have learned from these critics approaches to reading African-American literature and cultural products that depict unmotherly mothers, those socially marginalized, wild women characters who act as subjects through the various modes of disruption I have described above. Importantly, I privilege the voices of the mother figures themselves, rather than the voices of the daughters, taking up an analytical project brought up by Marianne Hirsch in her study of

maternal narratives. I apply black feminist literary theories to “look closely at what happens when the mothers speak, at how the mothers’ stories inform...the text that is structured around them” (Hirsch 417-418). By privileging these voices, and the kinds of absent or silent mother figures that they may represent, I hope to illuminate ways of understanding their functions in post Civil Rights literature.

For the most part, the black mother figures I study “claim the monstrosity” of their disruptive presence – “a female with the potential to name” – and offer a response to the “American grammar” of the racialized mother without capitulating to the polarity of wholly idealized or pathologized characters. Spillers argues in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar” that black women, already symbolically rendered outside the privileged space of white femininity, can use this marginality as a space of insurgency for “the female social subject” (229). Recognizing the sites of female insurgency informs Spillers’ other work, particularly her essays “Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women’s Fiction” and “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words.” In each essay, Spillers takes account of some aspect of black women’s navigation of gender that does not privilege what she calls the “ranks of gendered femaleness,” but rather allows for an assertion of subjectivity through a complicated negotiation of race, gender, sexuality and power (“Mama’s” 278). Her project is compelling in that there is a commitment to describing elements of black women’s historical transformative gender discourse without essentializing what she calls the “blackwoman myth,” those controlling images that have become necessary for certain techniques of domination and power relations to operate in the American landscape through chimera of black womanhood.

Spillers work compliments Henderson’s articulations of “the other” in her essay “Speaking in Tongues.” Henderson interprets black women’s texts as a kind of polyvocal

assertion of otherness, which is seen as a rhetorical advantage rather than a shortcoming. By privileging, rather than repressing, the non-normative, the marginal, ‘the other in ourselves,’ Henderson comes to the conclusion that “the initial expression of a marginal presence takes the form of disruption...This rupture is followed by a rewriting or rereading of the dominant story resulting in a ‘deligitimation’ of the prior story or a ‘displacement’ which shifts attention ‘to the other side of the story’ ” (Henderson 362). In other words, the status of “other” can be a strategic location of empowerment and resistance for black women, a place where the black female subject can debunk hegemonic ideologies regarding her race, class, gender and sexuality. Black women emerge from this site of rupture in order to refocus hegemonic dialogue toward their often discredited concerns. I wish to complicate these observations further by suggesting that the marginalized social roles of black mothers in the postmodern world forms a discursive loop that always already includes their strategic mobilization of difference, thereby situating the black (m)other as the consummate figure of transgression in African American culture.

From Holloway’s book *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, I borrow her deep engagement with the notion of “voice.” Holloway writes that voice is important because “black women’s literature is generated from a special relationship to its words, the concerns of orature and the emergence of textual language that acknowledges its oral generation must affect the critical work that considers this tradition” (69). She describes that concern through the concept of “plurisignance,” literary voice that is polyphonic, complex, multiplied and layered in ways that reflect similar qualities of African American culture (55). Furthermore, Holloway contends that motherhood has special significance in black women’s fiction, acting as “an umbilicus between language and creation.” (29). Therefore, rather than acting as a symbolic obstruction to the heroines development,

motherhood in black women's texts often acts as a catalyst for the subjective imperative known as "coming to voice."<sup>11</sup> My project, however, extends Holloway's meditation on voice. Rather than privileging the oral/aural over the "scriptocentric," the written word, I agree with Madhu Dubey, who points out that African-American literary tradition has always been critically concerned with the power of literacy, though it is sometimes considered skeptically. To conceive of the tradition, particularly the work of black women, as not invested in writing is to maintain "the racialized logic of uneven development," a kind of primitivist perspective of black difference (9). With these tensions in mind, my discussion of "voice" as constituting subjectivity will include both oral and literate forms of voice in order to avoid over-reliance on one form or another as demonstrative of African American culture generally.<sup>12</sup>

By insisting on a historically and culturally specific view of the mother figure, black feminist critics also offer departures from the early second-wave repudiation of motherhood by writers such as Kate Millet, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan and extensions of the recuperative efforts of Sara Ruddick, Adrienne Rich, and Nancy Chodorow, for example.<sup>13</sup> Holloway, for example, offers a critique of French feminist articulations of writing and "the body," arguing that black women's literature emerges from a specific cultural/spiritual community and must be taken into account in any interpretative work. These interventions have been particularly important within contemporary feminist theory because it offers an extension of theories of motherhood.<sup>14</sup> In the next section, I will give an overview of these critiques of feminist perspectives on motherhood and discuss how black feminist and womanist writers have shifted the "angle of seeing" in regards to black maternal theory.

### **"Angles of Seeing:" Perspectives on Motherhood**

When white feminist author Adrienne Rich wrote in the foreword of her influential 1976 text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* that "for what we know as the

‘mainstream’ of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities,” she encapsulated a general feminist perspective on motherhood of that moment (13). For white feminists, like Rich, who often hailed from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, the primary concern when interrogating woman-as-mother revolved around an exclusive critique of patriarchy using the tools of “mainstream” history. She and her sisters convey a story of motherhood as a social role that necessarily confines and oppresses all women. From this vantage point, feminists collapsed all female experience into one, white-dominated framework, ignoring how race, class, sexuality and cultural difference also influence the mothering experience and the symbolism of motherhood for large number of women. In 1977, however, Barbara Smith offers a black feminist critique of the shortcomings of (white) feminism in general and voices an alternative approach that “embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women”<sup>15</sup> (134). In other words, the lived experiences of black women defy the kind of one-size-fits-all feminism that many white women espoused, and this, of course, applied to the “universal” experience of motherhood. Interestingly, Rich ultimately revised her positivist stance on motherhood in a 1986 edition of her book, taking time to acknowledge how race, class, and sexuality influence motherhood as an institution, but her awareness came as a direct result of the influence of women of color, most especially black women.<sup>16</sup>

Though Smith’s essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” did not address motherhood directly, her influential work expressed the collective frustrations of a number of black women who identified as feminist and gave validation to the kind of literary – as well as political, social and cultural – critiques that shaped the burgeoning era of black feminism and womanism throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Working within that spirit, a number of black women

began to write about black women's reproductive lives from those standpoints. For instance, Angela Davis offers a political history of birth control rights in the United States in *Women, Race and Class* (1981). She explains why large numbers of black women – as well as Latina and Native American women – refused to align themselves with white women in struggles for reproductive rights. Though she does not address motherhood *per se*, Davis explains how a legacy of rape during slavery and sterilization abuse has generated a different and historically contingent kind of fight for reproductive freedom for black women – one that revolves around the right to become a mother if one chooses or a right to have as many children as one chooses. These historical legacies, therefore, reframe the concept of “choice” and women's reproductive agency.

Feminist critic bell hooks contends that this social and political history affects the meaning of motherhood for black women. She argues that black women resist racial domination through motherhood in her text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). In *Feminist Theory*, hooks summarizes what has now become an influential perspective on black motherhood:

Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing. (133)

Here again black motherhood is inscribed with different, *affirmative* meaning based on the historically specific context of racism and colonialism. Rather than reading it as a categorically oppressive status, motherhood becomes for black women a contingent space of positive longing and desire, because motherhood has been either controlled by or denied by a white supremacist patriarchy. While these are not necessarily literary critiques, hooks' and Davis' socio-political analyses provide the background necessary to explain how and why black women experience

and value motherhood differently than other women and how that difference may inflect various texts. Black feminist discussions of motherhood do not begin and end with an exclusively patriarchal analysis, as it has for many white women, but assumes that motherhood can be conceived of, at least partially, as a positive and affirming resistance to racial subjugation.

This observation is not to suggest that black women have not critiqued patriarchy. In fact, it was their vociferousness that offered the most resistance to the myth of the black matriarch as posited by Frazier and Moynihan, who attributed the problems of the black community on the “unnaturally” prominent figure of the black mother within families (Scott 86). These “strong black women” who headed households without adult male partners were seen as threatening to both white and black men. Not only were Black feminists adamant about critiquing the dominant social forces that created these single-parent households, many of them shifted the conversation from matriarchy to matrifocality. Drawing on sociological and anthropological evidence that shows many pre-colonial African societies were matrifocal in nature – with a high value of esteem for the role of mother within social relations – some black women have traded the matriarchy myth for a concept of matrifocality. By asserting that U.S. black culture retains a tie to its African past, black women have availed themselves of another evaluative model for their mothering work, matrifocality.

It is not until almost a decade after these interventions that Patricia Hill Collins begins to take up the issue of motherhood in her texts *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and the article “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” (1994). In these texts, Collins offers a concise and exemplary representation of black feminist concerns with motherhood, though she is by no means the first or only to take up this issue. Collins advances the work done by Smith, hooks, and Davis by developing a descriptive historical analysis of

controlling images of black mothers and by articulating a theory of black motherhood. She explains that feminist theory fails to take up the issues of black women in these critical ways: feminist theory seeks to describe a symbolic universal mother figure and mothering experience; it elevates the issue of male-domination over other oppressions, including those in which white women themselves participate; it uncritically divides work/family and public/private realms of experience; and it focuses on the primacy of the autonomous, individual (female) subject (“Shifting” 46). In sum, these areas of emphasis work to decontextualize motherhood, unmooring it from historically and culturally specific experience. Feminist maternal theories assume, for example, that black women’s everyday lives operate in discrete realms of work and family, public and private or that black women’s most pressing liberatory concerns are for their own, individual freedom, rather than that of their collective racial and/or ethnic groups. Collins demonstrates that for black women, the historic legacy of slavery as well as African cultural retentions have necessarily created a different view of motherhood, one that revolves around community, group survival, identity formation, and empowerment (48).

Empowerment, Collins argues, becomes the central theme within black women’s articulations of motherhood. Based on black women’s experiences of racist and sexist exploitation, there are three ways in which Collins argues that motherhood is conceived of as a locus of power for black women (“Shifting” 53). First, motherhood represents an alternative version of mainstream notions of “reproductive freedom.” Taking into account the historic legacy of slave breeding, in which black women were systematically raped by white men in order to reproduce workers in the plantation economy, and the forced sterilization of black women in later decades, the right to procreate *by choice* becomes a critical sign of black female empowerment. Secondly, the ability to keep and raise children becomes another site of power for

black women. Again, the legacy of antebellum family displacement, Jim Crow era lynching, and other physical threats to black people have created a social climate in which raising a black child to adulthood becomes a luxury and triumph for many black women. Finally, black women derive power from motherhood via their exercise of cultural transmission. As primary caregivers of black children, black women become largely responsible for the passing down of language and culture. To raise black children to any degree of psychic wholeness directly resists a system of racial inequality and white supremacy that perpetuates itself through the propagation of ideas of black inferiority. Of course, these narratives of empowerment are tempered by the material effects of racism, sexism, poverty, etc., and give way to what Collins calls a “dialectic of power and powerlessness” that shapes black women’s views on the institution of motherhood (49). Nevertheless, the language of *empowerment* rather than victimization has become an influential one regarding black mothers.

This kind of intervention has had profound effect on the analysis of black women’s textual articulations about motherhood. Black feminist theories of maternal empowerment provide the foundation for literary and cultural critics to interpret black women’s cultural production. The ability to read turn-of-the-(twentieth) century domestic fictions, for example, hinges on the reading of an empowered motherhood for black women. Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) positions black motherhood as a distinct source of power for black women. In her reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Carby notes that Linda Brent’s resistance against slavery and male domination is expressed through maternal language: “Her [Brent’s] strength and resourcefulness to resist were not adopted from a reservoir of masculine attributes but were shown to have their source in her ‘woman’s pride, and a mother’s love for [her] children” (56). Furthermore, Carby details how Linda Brent situates her

grandmother's womanhood as emanating from her ability to mother; that is, the ability to care for material and spiritual needs of her children, grandchildren, and community. Also looking at black women's slave narratives and novels of the post-Reconstruction era, Claudia Tate proposes in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992) that the domestic novels of writers such as Pauline Hopkins and Frances E.W. Harper relied on "a tradition of politicized motherhood that views mothers and the cultural rhetoric of maternity as instruments of social reform." (14) Social reform in the name of black families becomes the expression of power, status and control for black mother characters.

White women writing about motherhood too are beginning to decentralize mainstream feminist analyses of motherhood in favor of black feminist critique. For example, Andrea O'Reilly, a white feminist who writes about mothering, employs an ostensibly black feminist lens through which to understand maternal figures in the novels of Toni Morrison. Employing Collins' theories of maternal empowerment, O'Reilly traces in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004) how Morrison suggests that "black mothers engage in maternal practice that has as its explicit goal the empowerment of children" and that through this practice black women develop a distinct female identity that is independent of dominant culture (1). Not to put too fine a point on it, I am trying to demonstrate that much of the social and literary analysis about black mothers has taken up the black women's maternal empowerment thesis. What is interesting to note, however, is that in almost all cases the maternal empowerment privileges child-centered language; mothering work empowers when it is on the behalf of black children. Black mothers mother the race, the community, the collective black nation. Through this critical lens, reading acts of mothering that do not have this focus presents a more challenging task.

While maternal empowerment theory has clearly been influential and necessary, it oversimplifies the situation and ignores black women's nuanced responses to motherhood through literature and culture. The literature suggests that although black women do position motherhood and mothering differently and more positively than white feminists or other groups of mainstream women, this position is not without complications. Barbara Christian offers another "angle of seeing" black mothers that at once treads familiar ground and provides an alternative view. In her essay "An Angle of Seeing," Christian looks at Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Both texts, she argues, present women-centered visions of motherhood that resist the prevailing empowerment theory. While she does acknowledge that "freedom for black women has been keeping their own children," Christian explains that the essence of this "freedom" emerges from the sacrifice of their own lives, literally and figuratively (109). This sacrificial function of the mother, while highly theorized by white feminists, goes undertheorized in black feminism, Christian adds. The plight of Nnu Ego's life in *Joys of Motherhood*, for example, illustrates the kind of unjust sacrifice that black women are subjected to in the name of an affirmative and empowered motherhood. Christian writes that Emecheta's stark vision of motherhood marked by intense suffering on the part of the mother comments on a "lack of consciousness and silence in her society, where the personal lives of women and wider social change have yet to be related" (114). The way that Christian approaches Emecheta's harsh critique of African ideologies of motherhood provides a new angle of seeing maternal empowerment theories.

Alice Walker's *Meridian* provides a similar critique, but Christian seems to argue, Walker takes it a step farther to assert that, in the hands of some women, motherhood becomes a path toward self-awareness. In the novel, the character Meridian grapples with pregnancy and

motherhood; one child she bears and gives away, another she aborts. Because Meridian “perceives herself as having sinned against her maternal tradition” by not being empowered through child-rearing, she engages in a harrowing personal journey in which she loses her hair, has headaches, loses her sight and then becomes paralyzed (Christian 112). However, Meridian’s connection to the social and political world of the Civil Rights movement, Christian argues, allows Meridian the creative agency with which to mediate the meaning of motherhood for herself: “she becomes *strong* enough to return to the world, not strong in the sense of her mothers’ sacrifices, but in the sense of her understanding of the preciousness of life” (114). Barbara Christian emphasizes a different kind of “strong black mother,” one who is able to exert strength not through self-sacrifice but through a kind of self-centeredness. Meridian’s decision not to mother her biological children represents a selfishness that seems the antithesis of maternal care, but I think Christian argues that it is only through her struggles with motherhood that Meridian is able to emerge eventually as a more fully self-actualized woman. I am intrigued by the kind of revision that Christian suggests in this essay because it provides a theoretical blueprint for reading complicated texts like *Meridian*. It is this kind of intervention that speaks to the possibility of envisioning motherhood, or rather a maternal subjectivity, as a transgressive, self-centered practice.

By tracing feminist and black feminist perspectives on motherhood, I ground my work in theory that acknowledges the fluctuating, indeterminate and contingent nature of black mother figures as a symbolic category. With that interpretive framework in mind, I will next describe the origin and function of the trope “mama’s gun.” I draw on the symbolic opposition of “mama” – female and nurturing – and “gun” – male and destructive – to identify and describe transgressive maternal narratives in African American literature and culture. Mama’s gun is a term that draws

upon black vernacular epistemologies and highlights the ways in which reading the self-centered practice of black maternal figures subverts normative conceptions of gender and disrupt or “talk back” to hegemonic discourses that centralize black maternal difference as reason for continued exclusion of black people from the American Dream.

### **Mama’s Gun: A Trope**

I will begin my explanation of mama’s gun with a scene from Paule Marshall’s brilliant coming-of-age story *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). In the novel, a group of women from Barbados who have immigrated to Brooklyn, New York spend time together talking about their lives while they cook and care for their children. Florrie, along with Iris and other Bajan immigrant women, come and talk with their neighbor Silla while she cooks. Silla, the prototypical strong black mother, is frustrated by a comment made by Iris that praises their colonial oppressors in England. Silla snaps back asking “What John Bull ever do for you that you’s so grateful?” (69). From there the sharp-tongued and politically astute Silla deconstructs how colonial powers have relegated black women to lives of poverty and subservience. She goes on to define how many of the Bajan immigrant women have changed their situations by moving away and working toward homeownership in direct opposition to racist ideologies espoused by the British and sexist notions held by their husbands. Florrie and Iris sit in the kitchen and listen to Silla “rapt,” “respectful” and “solemnly” (70). That is when Florrie encourages Silla to “talk yuh talk. Be-jees. In this white-man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun” (70). While I am familiar with the U.S. black vernacular phrase of “talk that talk” as a way for a listener to affirm the words of a speaker, I am fascinated by Florrie’s more uncommon expression of “you got to take your mouth and make a gun.” Moreover, and in direct connection to this project, is the fact that Silla is a mother and her daughters sit in the kitchen with her while she “talks that talk.” The protagonist, the daughter Selina, is entranced by her mother’s “power

with words.” Mama’s gun references black mother figures’ power with words, words directed toward the act of self-creation, self-centeredness, and resistance.

The idea for mama’s gun also emerges from contemporary popular culture through the work of neo-soul singer Erykah Badu. In 2000, Badu released her third CD entitled “Mama’s Gun.” The cryptic meaning in the title baffled many listeners, until Badu revealed in an interview her own concept of mama’s gun. She explains to an interviewer that “Most of the time, you don't even know your mama have a gun. And when she pulls it out and shows it to you, it's something serious.” Extending her observation into metaphor, Badu adds that mama’s gun does not have to refer to an actual firearm, although in some cases it does, but that it can refer to the kind of explosive power available to black women when their creativity is unfettered. So when Badu adds that “they [audiences] can put my album in they holster,” she proposes a way of viewing her music, her singing, and her performance style as a kind of creative weapon, what cultural critic Carolyn Cooper calls a “lyrical gun.”

In the case of Badu, mama’s gun refers to her lyrical prowess and dexterity, skills that she calls upon throughout her music to “take out demons in [her] range” (Time’s A Wastin’). Those “demons” can be thought of as any of the numerous social, political, ideological and material assaults that black women face in their everyday lives. The attacks experienced by black mothers – through social welfare policies, inequality in reproductive choice, health care and education systems – could all be envisioned as “demons.” Badu uses her lyrical gun through the use of her songwriting, her singing, and her style. Furthermore, mama’s gun can be thought of as her tongue, the organ most associated with speech. Mama’s gun can serve both militant and violent purposes, but also can thought of as persuasive, supporting, or even comforting. Badu’s lyrical gun is her weapon of choice, which she uses on her listeners in order to tell her life story, appeal

to lovers, express vulnerability, assert strength, bond with other women, and navigate the world. Mama's gun can be fired with destructive intent, brandished with threatening intensity, revealed menacingly, or simply concealed; but it is there to provide protection when necessary. I think it serves as a useful trope in that it captures the polyvalent nature of black women's expressive speech culture generally, as well as the simultaneous creative and destructive potential of the specific experience of black mothering women.

Finally, mama's gun comes from my own familial experience. My great-grandmother, Louria Elbert, who died when I was 16 years old, was a woman known to regularly have a pistol and a rifle in her home in the woods of North Florida. While I was a young girl, I did not know anything about this part of my great-grandmother's life story. She was simply a frail old woman who lived in the country, who made breakfast for us every Sunday while my sister and I swept her yard. She was a very "motherly" woman to me. It wasn't until after her death that I came to learn of her exploits as a young mama. I found out that she armed herself for a number of reasons; importantly as defense against the Klan, which regularly marched through her coastal Florida town. But she also kept guns to defend her body and property from insincere and irresponsible lovers. It is said that she once shot at a beau after she discovered he had been stealing the blackberry wine she made for her own profits in order to raise money to give to another sweetheart. Upon hearing stories like this, I became fascinated with this "other side" of my sweet, dear old great-grandmother, who we affectionately called Yoya.

Interestingly, my grandmother, Annie Louise Ford, still has her mother's rifle, which I asked to see once. My grandma led me to a closet in the back of her house where she kept the rifle, tucked away and wrapped up inside one of my great-grandmother's quilts. Besides being an expert bootlegger, Yoya, and all of her sisters, sewed the most beautiful quilts from scraps from

their dresses, their husbands' and brothers' military uniforms and work-shirts, and the muslin sacks that carried flour and rice to their homes. The quilt, especially, has long served as a revered symbol of black women's creative agency. It is a symbol saturated with meaning attached to femininity, motherhood and community. So to see Yoya's brutal weapon and a box of shells wrapped inside of these quilts made me think about the relationship between the two, and the way in which both items have symbolic relevance in the portrayal of black women's lived experiences, yet the rifle or gun is not typically associated with their expressive heritage. The contrast of the shotgun and the quilts inform my development of mama's gun.<sup>17</sup>

I want to use these metaphors of contrast and contradiction – of making mouth into gun or of a gun wrapped in soft quilts – as an entry point in describing the trope of mama's gun. Through this trope of mama's gun, the confines of normative gender designations that demarcate a strict boundary between masculine and feminine might have the opportunity to be read as more fluid. Traditional masculine and feminine qualities might exist in an individual maternal figure. In the texts I use for this project, women characters speak, sing, write and generally “come to voice” through experiences that are connected to non-traditional, non-normative versions of motherhood. Mama's gun recurs in a number of texts in which black mother figures respond to controlling images through creative self-fashioning, self-definition, and reclaimed subjectivity. However, what they say, sing and write may not generally be understood as expressions of maternal subjectivity or any engagement with motherhood at all because they do not demonstrate recognizably feminine qualities associated with motherhood. In fact, in some cases they may reject motherhood altogether. Still, I argue that rejected or accepted, voluntary or forced that black mother figures interact significantly with a number of maternal ideologies that work on a

number of registers. Mama's gun serves as a theoretical framework for understanding these multivalent gestures.

### Chapter Summaries

This project includes a significant exploration of feminist, black feminist and womanist discussions of racialized motherhood from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In general, I think the existing method of critical analysis of motherhood still tends largely toward a child-centered critique; it focuses on the daughter's relationship to the mother figure and how much the mother figure nurtures them. I want to shift perspective and answer the following questions: How do black women conceive of motherhood as a self-centered practice? How do black women express this self-centeredness? How do their articulations contradict prevailing ideologies of black motherhood both inside and outside of black culture? It is my contention that the cultural artistry of black women works to navigate these often precarious boundaries between self and other in ways that are socially and politically transgressive. Their creative gestures, however, often may not neatly fit into the theoretical models offered from the past, making their transgressive gestures illegible. Instead of discarding this rich critical history, however, I wish to provide a bridge from the past to the future, a place where contemporary cultural production can be situated and understood properly within a framework of recent social and political changes.

In Chapter Two, " 'I Got Self, Pencil, and Notebook:' Literacy and Transgressive Motherhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *PUSH*, I bring the trope of mama's gun and the conception of "white ink" into conversation with each other in order to trace how black women have conceived their maternal selves and literate selves in tandem. Specifically, I read two contemporary novels, *The Color Purple* (1982) and *PUSH* (1996), as extensions of a tradition in African-American literature that uses maternal discourse as social protest. I develop my argument by first tracing the sources of the notion of the hyper-

reproductive black woman, which has become a recognizable part of American political and popular culture. I will then discuss how this imagery has shaped power relations within the recent U.S. political landscape, continuing the legacies of “alienated and fragmented maternity” begun during slavery.

In Chapter Three, “Mama’s Got the Blues, Or Sometimes I Feel Like a Childless Mother: The Blues as Maternal Counter-narrative in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*,” I connect metaphorical motherhood with women’s artistic creativity. I will lay the groundwork for my close reading of *Corregidora* by first detailing the feminist and womanist recuperation of blues women as feminist icons within the work of Angela Davis, Hazel Carby and Daphne Duval Harrison, who situate blues women within a framework of black feminist thought. I will extend their arguments by exploring the transgressive narrative possibilities of the figure of the “childless mother” as offered by Elaine Hansen Tuttle, E. Patrick Johnson, L.H. Stallings and others. Their insights contextualize my formulation of the blues mama as an instance of a “childless mother,” which will provide the theoretical vantage point from which to understand my reading of Ursa’s mothering of the blues. I am interested in exploring the multiple effects of the figure of the childless mother that link Ursa to a number of conversations within contemporary literary criticism and feminist thought that attempts to problematize concepts about gender.

In Chapter Four, “Colonized Wombs, Cyborg Bodies and Reproductive Technology: Maternal Dialectics of Lilith in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” I complicate these observations further by suggesting that the marginalized social roles of black mothers in the postmodern world forms a discursive loop that always already includes their strategic mobilization of difference, thereby situating (m)other as the consummate figure of resistance and transgression in many black women’s texts. Octavia Butler’s *Lilith* displays many characteristics

similar to all of the outrageous, non-maternal aspects of the Hebrew Lilith myth precisely because Butler's text "claims the monstrosity" of transgressive black womanhood. *Dawn*, the novel in the trilogy that focuses most on Lilith's story, invokes the histories of reproductive experimentation and exploitation that have contributed to the recent development of reproductive technology (RT). The novel stages an enactment of tension between black women's experiences with procreative invasion and the future of RT, and invokes a dialectic that confronts two modes of thinking about RT – the emancipatory and the oppressive.

In Chapter Five, "Big Mama, Madea, and SuperModel: (Queer) Performance of the Black Mother in the work of Tyler Perry and RuPaul," I explore the work of Perry and drag performer RuPaul, who have developed in their work a creative alter-ego that manifests aspects of "mama's gun." They each call their personas by different names – Madea and Supermodel – which I will describe in detail later in this chapter. Ultimately, I contend that these figures share similar symbolic resources for their work, and I classify these figures as (queer) performances of the black mother. In order to outline the contours of my argument, I will first establish why I read these performances as queer, particularly Perry's work, when he seems to resist this label the most. I will then map out the performative elements of black mother figures by tracing the historical referents of The Mammy and The Matriarch, whose synthesis forms the foundation for the contemporary image of the Big Mama.<sup>18</sup> Finally, in the last section, I explore how Tyler Perry and RuPaul incorporate and resist the performative nature of this figure, leading to an uneven use of mama's gun.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude the project through an exploration of future directions for the study of mama's gun. I look at black women comics who use humor as their mama's gun.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson uses the phrase “imagined community” in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* to describe how modern national identities form out of a sense of collective or community kinship. The “American Dream” is but one example of an imagined unity that reflects national identity. However, I agree with Felipe Smith’s assertion that Anderson “dodges the critical issue of subjectivity – the fact that those legally entitled to call themselves members of the nation, the “dreamers,” determine the image of the community “dreamed.” (4) That is, simply “dreaming” these identities is not enough, one has to have access to power to be “dreamers,” because national identities are disciplined and legitimated through relations of power and dominance.

<sup>2</sup> Actor and comedic writer Tina Fey makes ironic use of the phrase “baby mama” in her movie of the same name, released in 2008. Fey portrays an upper middle class, unmarried, professional white woman who decides to use a gestational surrogate so that she can have a baby. The surrogate, played by actor Amy Poehler, is a working-class white woman whose coarse behavior is supposed mark her as the stereotypical “baby mama.” I read the “white trashiness” of Poehler’s character as a sly wink to the audience regarding this stereotype, as if to say “look even white women can be ‘baby mamas.’ ” The joke is on us, however, because the movie is unable to pull this subversion off for at least two reasons. First, the major black male character in the movie is an “expert” on baby mamas thereby upholding the racial coding of the term. Second, there are no black women with speaking roles in the movie. Comedic subversion of racial stereotypes has to go farther than simple inversion, which is Fey’s approach, it must also include the representation of subjectivities of those who have been silenced by the stereotype.

<sup>3</sup> For more on controlling images, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), which identifies and describes the four major historical images: Mammy, Matriarch, Jezebel and Sapphire. Newer versions of these controlling images have emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Baby Mama, Gold Digger, Freak, and Earth Mother. For more on contemporary controlling images see Stephens and Few, “Effects of Images of African American Women in Hip Hop on Early Adolescents’ Attitudes Toward Physical Attractiveness and Interpersonal Relationships” in *Sex Roles* 2007, 56:251–264.

<sup>4</sup> Baby mama joined a number of racist portrayals of Michelle Obama during the campaign, implying at times that she was akin to a militant, a terrorist or a horse.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term transgression from the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who extend the concept of symbolic inversion in the work of anthropologists Victor Turner, Barbara Babcock and Mary Douglas from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. They use Babcock’s phrasing to describe transgression as “expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political.” Their notion of transgression departs from Bakhtin’s utopic vision of symbolic inversion as wholly counter-hegemonic in that they emphasize transgression as a relational and dialectic interaction between high and low, inside and outside, margin and center. They write that “there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression.” In other words, there is no pure resistance against structural oppressions. Rather, there is a strategic use of the polarities of official and illicit that has as its goal “the discovery of an intermediate link between the members of a binary opposition: a process known as mediation.” See Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 15-20.

<sup>6</sup> I intentionally use the term “mother figure” rather than “mother” throughout this project in order to differentiate between a number of figurative possibilities of “mother” and those characters who are mothers in a literal sense, a biological female parent. For a discussion of maternal semiotics, see Van Buren, *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Keeping in mind the pitfalls of periodization, I depart slightly from the dates most associated with the modern U.S. civil rights movement. Many histories situate the start of the movement much later than I do, pointing to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, which abolished the nation’s separate but equal educational

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policies, the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, or the 1955 start of the Montgomery bus boycott. Instead, I discuss the beginning of the Civil Rights “era” in the years immediately following the end of World War II. Social agitation for civil rights increased as black troops returned as heroes from the war front to Jim Crow policies all over the country. The post-war period marks the burgeoning of these resistant voices that drove the judicial and legislative changes that have come to be associated with the Civil Rights Movement. As for the end of the era, I am using 1968 – the year of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the passage of one of the Civil Rights Acts – as the end point for this periodization, and the beginning of the post-Civil Rights era.

<sup>8</sup> Inclusive politics of the Civil Rights movement relied on the representational power of black women in the movement. The selection of Rosa Parks as the “mother of the Civil Rights movement” was made after a 15-year-old woman, Claudette Colvin, first challenged the segregated seating laws on the buses of Montgomery. Colvin, unmarried and pregnant, was deemed by the NAACP organizational leadership as an unfit symbol of the struggle for equality. Her “deviant” motherhood negated her symbolic value, and Rosa Parks, the married seamstress, was asked to stage the public protest. For more, see Steffen, “Rita Dove’s On the Bus with Rosa Parks” in *The Civil Rights Moment Revisited: Critical Perspectives on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States* (Piscataway, NJ : Transaction Publishers, 2001), 127-140.

<sup>9</sup> Essentially, Spillers’ words identify an instance of Foucault’s concept of biopower, which he identifies in *The History of Sexuality* as the deployment of sexuality in the “power over life” (139). Foucault describes his project as such: “Deployments of power are directly connected to the body...what is needed is to make it [deployments of power] visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another...but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective.” (151-152) Here, Foucault considers the ways in which discourses of sexuality have worked to materialize “sex.” In much the same way that Judith Butler considers how “gender” materializes “sex,” Foucault argues that sex is not an “exterior domain,” it is “a result and an instrument of power’s designs” (152). By historicizing and contextualizing the role of black women’s reproductive labor within the political and social economy of the United States as Spillers has, we can further demonstrate what Foucault has described as a discursive shift from the power over death to the power over life. Applying Foucault’s notion of biopower to the circumstances of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century African-American life has led me toward my concern with post-Civil Rights political economies.

<sup>10</sup> Post-colonial, Marxist critic Gayatri Spivak also privileges the subjectivity and voice of the insurgent figure – particularly so-called Third World women – in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She writes that “In the semioses of the social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in place of ‘the utterance.’ The sender – the ‘peasant’ – is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness....The ‘subject’ implied by the texts of insurgency can only serve as a counterpossibility for the narrative sanctions granted to the colonial subject in the dominant groups.” In other words, there is a danger of epistemic violence against the subaltern woman when her insurgent voice is only “pointed to” rather than considered as true consciousness. I am keeping Spivak’s warning in mind throughout this project.

<sup>11</sup> Carole Boyce-Davies shares Holloway’s concept of motherhood as a generative identity within black women’s texts. See Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of literacy in contemporary African-American literature, see Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (translated by H. M. Parshley, New York: Knopf, 1953), Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), and Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970). Also Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976, 1995), and Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

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<sup>14</sup> I use the term feminist here and throughout this project to denote white, middle to upper class, mainstream, U.S. articulations of women's liberation. Though I am persuaded by bell hooks' arguments in *Ain't I a Woman* and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that it is essential for non-white women to embrace and use the term "feminist," I will revert to the more popular distinction between (white) feminism and black feminism, or even womanism. Despite hooks' intervention, it is still common practice to mark these feminism(s) this way, and I still believe it is politically useful to do so.

<sup>15</sup> There are other articulations by black women that take up similar themes that predate Barbara Smith. Nineteenth-century figures, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs, highlighted these kinds of interlocking factors. I use Barbara Smith's essay, because she explicitly uses the term "black feminist." This consciousness toward the label of black feminist and its direct critique of white, mainstream feminism makes this text stand out.

<sup>16</sup> I will concentrate on black women's critiques for the remainder of this discussion, although a number of other feminists of color have critiqued white, U.S. based, mainstream feminism.

<sup>17</sup> Mama's gun reflects the literary legacy articulated in Alice Walker's poem within the essay *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: They were women then/ my mother's generation/ husky of voice – stout of/ step/With fists as well as/ Hands*. The dialectic of mama's gun reflects the way "fist" and "hand" operate in this verse.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the connections and disjunctions between performance and performativity and their implications within critiques of race, gender, and sexuality, see Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993), and E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

CHAPTER 2  
I GOT SELF, PENCIL, AND NOTEBOOK: ' LITERACY AND MOTHERHOOD IN ALICE  
WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND SAPPHIRE'S *PUSH*

He took my other little baby, a boy this time... I got breasts full of milk running down myself.

-- Celie, *The Color Purple*

I like baby I born. It gets to suckes from my bress... He's a good baby. But he's not mine. I mean, he is mine. I push him out my pussy.

-- Precious, *PUSH*

Nobody had her milk but me.

-- Sethe, *Beloved*

Rich with nutrition and meaning, mother's milk supplies a plenitude of symbolic wealth to many of the works by contemporary black women writers. In a number of texts, black female subjectivity – the “me” in Sethe's declaration or the “my” in Precious's reflections – gains expression via the vital metaphor of milk. To possess and control the milk created by one's own body and to choose freely with whom to share it demonstrates a supreme act of personal autonomy for black women. The collective reproductive history of black women shows how fraught this kind of bodily autonomy can be; one has only to recall what Angela Y. Davis calls “the alienated and fragmented maternities” of black women – the histories of breeding, wet nursing and sterilization, the racialized vilification of their reproductive choices or the flat-out abduction of their children by fathers or by the state (213). Mapping Davis' historical materialist assessment onto black feminist and French feminist literary theories about milk provides a way of reading black women's sense of autonomy, and, by extension, their relationships with their communities and the nation through images of breasts and breast-feeding. This chapter will demonstrate that the recurring symbolic matrix of milk appears in black women's texts as a way

to imagine the autonomous black female self through the mothering body and, importantly, links this autonomy to the domain of self-expression and voice, specifically the act of writing.

In *The Color Purple*, the image of Celie's "breasts full of milk running down" centralizes mother's milk as a site of her physical trauma, exemplifying her loss of bodily control (4). Celie writes to God about her engorged breasts that involuntarily overflow with the milk that would have fed her newly born son, who had been taken at birth by the man she believes to be her own father and has sired another child with her, a daughter. The biological imperative of Celie's lactating body continues even when her baby is no longer present, a descriptive moment that represents the futility of motherhood some black women have faced when their babies have been taken. Similarly, Precious, the heroine of Sapphire's novel *PUSH*, invokes her breast-feeding as well, but as a way to celebrate her determination to keep and raise her son Abdul, who "suckles at my bress" (68). With her first child already taken from her and institutionalized, Precious resolves to raise her son, who like Celie's children, is fathered by a dominant paternal figure – a father or step-father. For Precious to fulfill the bodily cycle of birth ("I push him out my pussy") and nourishment ("He suckes at my bress") demonstrates a kind of agency, a claiming of self that centers around her desire to mother.

The centrality of mother's milk in contemporary black women's fiction emerges, too, in one of Sethe's moving re-memory scenes in *Beloved*. During this exchange, Sethe describes to Paul D how desperately she needed to be reunited with her baby girl who she had sent ahead toward freedom before escaping the Sweet Home plantation herself: "anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it [breast milk] on the front of my dress" (16). Yet, worse than milk shed into muslin, worse than a chokecherry tree planted by rawhide across brown skin was the violation she experienced at the hands of Schoolteacher's

nephews, who took the milk meant to feed her baby. Sethe's words haunt the narrative as she tells the story to Paul D, suggesting that the men had stolen from her not just nourishment for her child, but also her concept of self. Mothering, milk, and subjectivity are conflated when Sethe boasts to Paul D that "Nobody was going to nurse her *like me*" (16, emphasis added). The phrase "like me" acts to distinguish Sethe's ability to nurse her daughter over any other woman, and it is here she makes a critical claim to womanhood. Her multiple physical and psychic violations on the Sweet Home plantation denied her access to the ideologies of white womanhood, an identity through which she might have accessed a limited power to protect herself or to be protected.<sup>1</sup> Instead, motherhood provides an important link to her notions of womanhood, such that Sethe's potential for autonomy and agency in the novel hinges upon her recognition as a mother.

So if mother's milk is the metaphorical "white ink" through which women "come to language and launch their force," as Helene Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," then what happens when a woman's production of milk is blocked or thwarted, or the milk is wasted or stolen?<sup>2</sup> How can a woman who, like Celie, Precious, or Sethe, is estranged from her "white ink" still come to voice? The answer, in part, involves attuning our critical lens toward those mother figures who are most marginalized from normative, hegemonic conceptions of motherhood and womanhood. When the lives and experiences of these black mother figures are taken into consideration, mother's milk as metaphor for women's creative self-expression changes its theoretical possibility. I look toward the links made by Afro-Trinidadian poet Marlene Norbese-Phillips who asks in her brilliant poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language": "What is my mother tongue? My mammy tongue, my mummy tongue, my momsy tongue, my modder tongue, my ma tongue?" Norbese-Phillips describes in this multi-textual poem the disruption of language, and therefore identity and agency and voice that has occurred in the

African experience of captivity, colonization, enslavement and apartheid all over the world. She draws connections between the symbolic affect of mothering and language; the mother tongue a source of voice, without which she is “tongue dumb.” Yet, by marking a fundamental disruption – “without a mother to tongue/a tongue to mother” – Norbese-Phillips creates an opportunity for recovery of voice through the acknowledgement of maternal loss. The limitations of the white ink metaphor lie in this difference. By assuming all women as women have equal access to maternal creative force, the metaphor breaks down because it fails to address the significance of maternal loss – loss of language, loss of milk – that many women face.

In this chapter, I bring the trope of mama’s gun and the conception of white ink into conversation with each other by tracing the development of two contemporary black mother figures whose white ink has been stolen or threatened. Celie and Precious, considered outside of the norms of respectable motherhood because they are black, young, unwed, and victims of sexual abuse, resist their marginalization through their quest to keep their children, to use their milk, the written word, their “mama’s gun.” I read both characters as extensions of a tradition in African-American literature that uses maternal figures for social critique. In this case, I think Celie and Precious, because of their appearance in texts published during the 1980s and 90s, were imagined as responses to the racially charged notion of the hyper-reproductive black woman popular in that era. Alice Walker, who published *The Color Purple* in 1982, and Sapphire, who published *PUSH* in 1996, assert the socio-political subjectivity of black mother figures whose relationship with the nation has been one of abjection, ridicule and suspicion, without capitulating to constraints of respectable femininity or compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, when Sapphire imagines Precious, the overweight, poor, HIV-positive, black teen mother protagonist of *PUSH* writing “I got self, pencil, and notebook,” she allows Precious to

transgress the expectations that would keep a mother like her outside of the bounds of speaking and writing subject (36). Staking a claim to her “self” as well as her tools for writing makes the case that Precious, and Celie to a different degree, use their pens – their white ink – as weapons to resist ideologies that use and abuse their bodies, experiences, and images. In these two examples, mama’s gun works as a trope for print literacy and writing, the pen operating as a weapon of subversion and resistance in the hands of two black mother figures.

Despite the primacy and privilege given to the function of orality in African-American texts, especially black women's literature, I ultimately agree with Madhu Dubey, who cites a number of African-American novels including *PUSH* that “continue to be profoundly invested in the modern idea of print literacy as a vehicle for social critique and advancement” (56).<sup>3</sup> The literature that I examine privileges print within the African-American literary tradition steadily marked by a tenuous relationship with writing. Mastery of writing in colonial languages can either enter texts as representative of black participation in the social and political life of the nation or as scenes of alienation from the black community, which is sometimes imagined as pre-literate and oral utopias. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*, writes that “the black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue” (339). Therefore, in many cases, the flavor of black vernacular speech – and other non-literate cultural expression such as dance and music – becomes valorized in “speakerly texts” to the point that African-American culture is difficult to imagine outside of this framework (Dubey 40). However, with Dubey's meditations on print literacy in postmodern black texts in mind, I see both *The Color Purple* and *PUSH* as part of a move to “critically re-appropriate the print legacy in an effort to extend the social and political provenance of their representational medium” (50). It is from this vantage point that I assert that

the symbolic function of writing, coextensive to the act of mothering, in *The Color Purple* and *PUSH* provide a lens through which to investigate how black mother figures function within the social and political hierarchies of the post-Civil Rights moment.

To be sure, both works operate in “speakerly” ways, yet both novels compel readers to consider orality as part of the developing print literacy of their characters, a process that I argue relies heavily upon maternal experience as metaphor. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy describe in their edited collection, *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, the importance of analyzing motherhood as a dialectic of lived experience and metaphor. In their view, women either turn to “childbirth as metaphor, not as narrated experience: the cliché of the creative process is one in which the (usually male) artist gives birth to a work of art” or that “women writers tend to privilege the literal, a strategy that often leaves them with no figurative ground on which to stand” (4-5). My project attempts to achieve a dialectic conversation between these two impulses.

*Beloved* figures in this study insofar as it elevates, like *PUSH* and *The Color Purple*, maternal desire as its dominant narrative focus and equates, not without some ambivalence, black motherhood with freedom. Sethe’s experiences in that novel, however, centralize stories told out loud or remembered in dreams and flashbacks. Sethe never writes her own story down, and, in fact, she is haunted by a newspaper article that describes her act of infanticide. Sethe’s relationship to print “is sobered against [her] awareness that language itself has been deployed against black selfhood, that language itself is a colonization” (Quashie 130). Narratively and formally, however, *The Color Purple* and *PUSH* propose print literacy – writing and learning to write – as a viable means to challenge and critique hegemonic ideas about black motherhood as well as black women’s capacity for social and political citizenship.

*PUSH* eventually works as a palimpsest of *The Color Purple*, rewriting and revising the story of Celie via the character of Precious Jones, within the urban dystopia of 1980s America. Unwed, functionally illiterate, and victims of incest and rape, Celie and Precious narratively embody the worst ideological stereotypes about black mothers. They are unwed at the time of their pregnancies; they are pubescent, and impregnated by men who are either biologically or socially considered their fathers. Yet, these two women write in resistance to the ideologies that have sought to define them. I read the resistance in these two texts as an allegorical resistance to the ways in which black mothers haunt the U.S. national imagination as social and economic vampires and as immoral, careless breeders. The net historic result of these influential representations has rendered the notion of reproductive freedom a highly contested terrain for black women, so much so that the ability for black women to bear and raise their own children has been and remains a critical aspect of their reproductive politics, particularly for those who are poor and working-class. Sterilization by force or without consent, coerced or mandatory birth control use, lack of adequate prenatal care, and the abduction of babies and children are all part of the historic practices that have haunted black motherhood. The following section seeks to detail the development of black women's reproductive politics in the post-Civil Rights moment, which ultimately forms the backdrop for the texts I will consider later in the chapter.

### **'Alienated and Fragmented Maternities': Black Women's Contemporary Reproductive Politics**

I rely on Angela Davis' conception of "alienated and fragmented maternities" as an organizing tool for charting the historical complexities of black women's reproductive politics. In her essay, "Surrogates and Outcast Mothers," Davis connects black women's reproductive experiences to the legacies of racism in the United States. These experiences form a central aspect of black women's reproductive politics, and is echoed in legal scholar Dorothy Roberts'

statement that “reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics” (9). Unlike other feminist theories on motherhood, black feminist/womanist approaches require issues of gender to be considered along with race and class as interlocking factors that affect how black women construct the subjective space of motherhood. It also requires a diligent attention toward how history has affected social relations and cultural production (Carby 252). From this vantage point, I want to look at how motherhood and race remain conjoined within a complex matrix of citations and referents that “require one another as co-originating and co-dependent forms of oppression rather than merely parallel, compounded, or intersecting forms; and that these co-dependent structures of race and sex converge especially on the mother who reproduces racial boundaries in her function as subservient procreator” (Doyle 21). Slavery marks a significant milestone in the development of this historical trajectory.

Black fertility and reproduction was a significant conundrum for the nation during the development of post-bellum America. Not only were black people no longer legally available as slave labor (though black labor was still largely exploited through peony and sharecropping for decades after emancipation), but also and more significantly, those same black people also now possessed constitutional rights as citizens through the enactment of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments.<sup>4</sup> Black Americans, who in the years right after the Civil War outnumbered whites in the South could now vote, hold property, serve on juries, etc. As a result, a number of political and legal techniques to curb black citizenship emerged – not to mention the outright terrorist tactics of lynching and the Ku Klux Klan – in order to maintain a privileged white male domination of the nation. Jim Crow, the massive disenfranchisement of black voters, and the legal doctrine of “separate but equal” all rear their heads during this period. In almost every domain, black people became a liability to the power structure, and the target of this particular

problem congealed around the familiar physical “grammar” of the reproductive bodies of black women established during slavery.<sup>5</sup>

This physical grammar gains reinforcement as genetics, technologies of birth control, and the “science” of eugenics converge at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Importantly, eugenic researchers began to study vigorously the “differential birth rate,” the difference between reproduction rates among “the fit” and “the unfit.” Sterilization laws soon followed, and between 1907 and 1931, sterilization was used by the state as a countermeasure to eugenically minded fears of degenerate reproduction contaminating the nation.<sup>6</sup> These laws targeted the so-called unfit, feeble-minded, and insane, but in actual practice disproportionately targeted immigrant, black and Native American women. Furthermore, the criteria for designations such as “feeble-mindedness” were linked to female sexual activity, particularly promiscuity among women and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Laura Doyle writes about the rise of eugenics during this period and the two-fold deployment of eugenic arguments to shore up power for the “racial patriarchy.” She cites, of course, the negative eugenics of forced sterilization. She also describes the parallel narrative of positive eugenics, in which white racialized motherhood is celebrated and encouraged. It is within this discursive space of positive eugenics that the exaltation of motherhood and mothers becomes necessary to the propagation of the white race and America as a nation. Motherhood is promoted as “the representational space of public dignity and value that used to be reserved as a utopian promise for women” (Berlant 147). National identity becomes inextricably linked to the corporeality of the (white) female form, Berlant continues, “its fat, its femaleness, its fetus – explicate[s] its status as a national stereotype and as a vehicle of production of national culture” (148).

African Americans were not inured to the cultural rhetoric swirling around the idealized racial mother and her opposite, whose body was thought to hold the threat of cultural contamination and degeneration. As a resistance to the myriad political and economic oppressions that sought to destroy black life, black women in the 1930s and 1940s began to participate willingly in the construct of the “the black lady,” the “middle class, professional black woman who represents...the politics of respectability” (Collins 80). In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these black women embraced motherhood as a resistance to Jim Crow, eugenics, racial science, and the symbolic status of their bodies and their children as threats or sites of harm inflicted against the socio-cultural norm. They become determined through the use of the cultural institutions of the church-house and school-house to raise families of productive black citizens against all odds. Black women participated in the cult of racialized motherhood to produce black children – this time, for black people, a black nation.<sup>7</sup> While this certainly speaks to a reproductive and maternal agency reclaimed by black women resistant to white racial domination, the black lady remains largely defined by, created, and made legible in the social realm through her reproductive labor and her vociferous claims to respectable femininity, in this case in service to the construction of a black nation.

Historically there has been a concerted effort on the part of the white racial patriarchy to exploit the reproductive labor of black women, so much so that their bodies were made to function as reproductive machines for a slave economy. When those women were no longer useful to that end – post emancipation – their fertility was controlled, curbed and systematically annihilated through the rise of eugenic arguments that hinged on the image of the hyper-reproductive black woman’s body as its referent. As a final component of the eugenic movement, researchers sought to tie metaphysical superiority or degeneracy to “scientifically” racial

categories, with black women still representing the threatening “problem” of rampant fertility. To put it another way, the development of the representations of the breeding black woman, the sterilized black woman, and the black lady all require the referent of the hyper-reproductive, ever-fertile soil of the black woman’s body. The political, social, and economic aims of each image are different, contingent upon the needs of their particular political moment, but each similarly evokes a legibility of black maternity that has persisted since slavery. By the dawn of the post-Civil Rights era, the hyper-reproductive black mother had been secured as “fact” of black womanhood.

One has to look no further for proof than the suggestion made by former U.S. Education Secretary Bill Bennett in 2005 that: “[Y]ou could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down.”<sup>8</sup> Riding the pathological ethos created by the words and images surrounding the Hurricane Katrina disaster that year, Bennett suggested the abortion of black babies as a solution to the problems of crime. Bennett’s comment renders actual black women invisible; he never names or blames black mothers directly. Yet, of course, black mothers remain overwhelmingly present, embedded within the crevices of his statement as simply women available for compulsory abortions or women responsible for giving birth to and raising “criminal” children. Black entertainer Bill Cosby perpetuated a similar logic in 2004 when he publicly targeted black women as responsible for the lack of economic and political gains in black communities since the Civil Rights era. In the name of black uplift and decency, Cosby engaged images of young black women as hyper-sexual and hyper-reproductive:

Five or six different children, same woman, eight, ten different husbands or whatever...I’m telling you, they’re young enough. Hey, you have a baby when you’re twelve. Your baby turns thirteen and has a baby, how old are you? Huh? Grandmother. By the time you’re twelve, you could have sex with your grandmother, you keep those numbers coming. I’m just predicting.<sup>9</sup>

Cosby's prediction and Bill Bennett's recommendation join a litany of contemporary references to the hyper-reproductive black mother in the post Civil Rights Era. Important to my work are the characteristics assigned to those mothers: promiscuity, immorality, criminality, unmarried, unmarriageable, ignorance, and youth. These kinds of attacks are unique in our current political moment in the way that they work to obscure structural racism as a social ill, and instead concentrate attention on issues of "personal responsibility" and "sexual propriety," a clear example of what Collins calls "the new racism."

The social/political analyses here create the background necessary to explain why black women may experience and value motherhood in ways that do not repudiate it. These observations of the "alienated and fragmented" nature of black motherhood form the foundation through which I will read *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*. Understanding how these novels function requires an understanding of the images and ideologies to which black women are responding. In the following sections I will consider how these two novels use the dialectic of maternal experience and metaphor as a means of writing the lives of marginalized black maternal figures into post-Civil Rights politics, and how these figures wield mama's gun toward the evolution of their transgressive maternal identity.

### **'Heroic Maternal Self-Transformation' in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

In this section, I will use Claudia Tate's description of "heroic maternal self-transformation" to analyze *The Color Purple*, a text that is either celebrated or denigrated for its concern with the private, domestic, affective world of a subjugated black woman. Though much work has been done to show how Celie grows in the novel, Tate's formulation provides the critical lens through which to link Celie's transformation to motherhood. Celie's narrative within this multi-voiced text has been criticized for a lack of attention to the methods of socio-political protest that have become recognizable in the African-American literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> Walker's

protest, if you will, seems focused on Celie's personal transformation as expressed through motifs of confession. Celie's localized, private journey from the fracture of sexual and emotional abuse to that of personal autonomy and sexual liberation is one of the novel's strengths. Yet, as Lauren Berlant writes, "Celie must gain agency within her immediate, 'subjective' environment before she can come to terms with her 'impersonal' or institutional relations" (837). Berlant locates the novel's engagement with "institutional relations," particularly the project of national identity formation, in Nettie's letters to Celie, which detail the complexities of race, class, and gender in the wider world. Berlant reads the racial and gendered social context for the novel as "deflected from Celie's tale onto events in the economic and cultural marketplace" (843).

On the other hand, Linda Selzer takes issue with responses to *The Color Purple*, like the Berlant essay, that see Celie's private explorations as preemptive of "public, institutional, structural investigations into her abjection" (67-68). Selzer embarks on a project to situate the critiques of "race and class as coextensive with Celie's domestic reflections" (68). Yet even in this expression of "sympathy" for the text – and other women's texts that are often critically dismissed for their sentimentality and happy endings – Selzer still relegates the novel to a kind of positively imagined marginality. (pg. 79, footnote 1). Furthermore, Selzer's reading relies heavily on the narrative moments that revolve around Nettie's travels in the colonial world, Sophia's incarceration and forced labor in the Mayor's home, and Squeak's rape as arbiters of the novel's public, political consciousness, rather than any of Celie's experiences. Celie's abjection in the bulk of the novel obscures the kind of reading that I think is possible. I want to embark on a project that situates Celie's story within both a framework of the domestic/personal and the public/political. I am asking: How can *The Color Purple* be read as an expression of political, historical consciousness; an expression of public and private desire, even if it is a desire

unfulfilled? How can Celie's writing be seen as a comment upon and even conversation with the public sphere? And, finally, how does Celie's engagement with her troubled motherhood inform her ability to respond to these concerns? I think Claudia Tate's insights into the implications of maternal discourse in black women's texts can provide a glimpse of new possibilities for reading *The Color Purple*, and later, in this chapter, Sapphire's novel *PUSH*, which I argue extends Walker's work in *The Color Purple* to situate motherhood as a heroic and transgressive identity for black women.

Tate's important work *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* establishes how maternal discourse was manipulated toward a politics of freedom and autonomy early within black women's literary tradition. Tate examines two of the earliest publications by U.S. black women, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). In *Domestic Allegories*, Tate asserts that Jacobs and Wilson "utilize maternal discourses of desire as a particularly black and female politicization of domestic ideology" (26). Against the historical backdrop of 19<sup>th</sup>-century "alienated and fragmented maternities" of black women, Jacobs and Wilson write themselves into the social and political discourses of abolition and liberation by participating in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century cult of true womanhood, which includes a maternal ideology that emphasizes women's "natural" roles as child-bearers and nurturers. Within this framework, womanhood, true womanhood, cannot be achieved outside of motherhood. Tate explains that the expression of maternal feelings of protection, nurturance and love for children, allows Jacobs and Wilson a kind of "fictive participation in these institutions (womanhood, motherhood and family) [that] constitutes a political discourse of desire" (Tate 25). What's more, Jacobs and Wilson act as transgressive mothers themselves, "mothering" the texts that they write and inverting the traditional beliefs about black women's capacities for authorship. Both texts of

their texts and motivations as writers have been misunderstood and misread as facile copies of the sentimental fiction of their eras, and have suffered relative literary obscurity until recent years when a number of scholars have revisited their work.<sup>11</sup> Tate intervenes in this marginalization in order to shed light on the texts' sophisticated commentaries on the commingled ideologies of race, family, domesticity and citizenship.

Similarly, *The Color Purple* has been misread and misunderstood because of its insulated narrative world of a coming-of-age black woman, and the depiction of the intimate violence that marks this process for Celie. Although Alice Walker's novel became a literary sensation in 1982, winning both an American Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize the following year and spending several weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, it faced a scrutiny similar to that of Jacob's text, which was published more than 120 years earlier.<sup>12</sup> Part of the issue was that *The Color Purple*, like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "breaches social and literary convention ... to make the sexual oppression of an adolescent black female a symmetrical paradigm to that of the brutally whipped bondman for the institutions depravity" (Tate 26). This breach offers a radical revision in terms of how novels of domesticity are read; Tate concludes that Jacob's domestic mode for asserting her freedom marginalized *Incidents* within the genre of slave narrative as exemplified by the best-selling narrative of Frederick Douglass published in 1845.<sup>13</sup> Harriet Jacobs detailed her experiences as the object of sexual violence as an enslaved woman in the home of Dr. Flint. After many years of trying to secure freedom from the harassment she endured from Dr. Flint, Jacobs initiates a kind of sexual liberation for herself through the selection of another white planter, Mr. Sands, as a sexual partner. This relationship was certainly affected by the unequal social status of the planter and Jacobs. Yet, Jacobs' insistence on resisting Dr. Flint and choosing who would father her children remains one of the remarkable

aspects of this text. Here, freedom takes shape in the form of a “domestic desire for the nurturance of free black children” and a pronounced desire to write, which Tate describes as “heroic maternal self transformation” (38). The powerlessness and abjection of the enslaved black woman gets reconfigured in both Jacobs’ and Wilson’s texts via the black woman’s successful fulfillment of motherhood and her accomplishment as a writer. Parallel to the triumphant assertion of manhood that is exemplified in Douglass’ text in his physical challenge of the overseer Covey, the emergence of black womanhood is aligned with maternal agency in Jacobs and Wilson’s texts. *The Color Purple* is an extension of this tradition, with a slightly different focus. Celie’s developing maternal agency talks back to the post Civil Rights era specter of the hyper-reproductive black woman. Celie, as a maternal figure, exemplifies many of the characteristics of this particular controlling image, yet Walker develops her as a character who defies the expectations of her place in the world in order to transform it herself.

### **Celie Emerges as a Writer**

In *The Color Purple*, Celie begins to write against all odds, and it is her confusion about her sexual victimization and pregnancy that compels her to take up the pen. The first entry in her collection of letters recounts the horrors of her fourteenth year, beginning “last spring,” when Celie’s ailing mother starts refusing sex with “Pa.”<sup>14</sup> Pa turns his sexual interests toward Celie, rapes and impregnates her. After writing about these events, Celie ends her first letter by writing: “And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook” (2). Shifting from the past to the present, Celie describes the morning sickness that is often an early sign of pregnancy. I find it significant that she begins writing at this point in her life; not when Mama dies or she leaves the house to marry Mr., but as she discovers that she is pregnant. Alienated from her body, she asks God in the first letter to “give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). She then spends the next several letters detailing and commenting on the reproductive lives of the black women

in her community. The narrative begins to establish that “what is happening” to her is an initiation into a troublesome cohort of black mothers that includes her mama, Pa's second wife, and Mr.'s first wife. Celie's short early letters put her story into a context of these women's lives that include successive, forced pregnancies, oppressive child rearing duties, physical exhaustion, reproductive illness, lack of sexual control, and punishment for sexual agency. Limited though they are in terms of structural, institutional critique, Celie's early letters, like her early literacy show a rudimentary engagement with powers that control her life and, importantly, they show a desire for autonomy that parallels her desire for her stolen babies.

Though the scope of Celie's earliest letters seem almost claustrophobic in their concentration within her domestic, private world and that of her relatives, even her earliest letters show a critical consciousness about gender inequality. Her observations are not racialized, nor are they concerned yet with the wider politics of the world. She does, however, gesture toward the institutions of the church, the home and the school as sites of subjection for women like herself. Gradually, the letters provide more detail that demonstrates Celie's budding awareness about social inequalities and how they affect her and other women. Celie's eighth letter extends her emerging gender consciousness by making clever allusions to marriage as akin to colonial conquest. As she describes the events leading to her arranged marriage to Mr., Celie begins by telling how long it took for Mr. to “make up his mind to take me” (10). At this point, Celie holds no fairy-tale illusions about marriage. Certainly after observing the lives of Mama, Pa's new wife and Mr.'s first wife, she has a non-romantic view of marriage. Her language, though it mirrors the words of a marriage vow – “do you *take* this woman...” – the vocabulary also flatly suggests a theft. Women are objects to be traded, simply taken and moved into various households headed by men – their fathers, husbands or brothers. As a result of this awareness, Celie writes about a

plan for her and Nettie to run away. Celie is now quite savvy about the sexual politics of her surroundings. She understands that Nettie's physical beauty makes her sexually desirable to Mr. Where once Celie wanted to distract Mr. from Nettie's beauty by trying to “git in his light” (6) whenever he looked at her in order to protect Nettie from the kind of violation she has experienced, Celie now wants to use Mr.'s attraction to Nettie in order to secure freedom for them both. Interestingly, this passage is juxtaposed to a discussion of Christopher Columbus, in which Celie reflects on how Nettie helped her remember “who discover America”:

Nettie say, you think about cucumbers. That what Columbus sound like. I learned all about Columbus in the first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot. She say Columbus come here in boats called the Neater, the Peter, and the Santomareater. Indians so nice to him he force a bunch of 'em back home with him to wait on the queen. (10)

Celie's lampoon of colonial history is situated directly after her lampoon of marriage. I see parallels in these two narrative strands; Celie knows that she has been stolen, or rather “taken” in marriage and textually connects this experience with the theft of Indians in the New World. The narrative juxtaposition of these two strands of thought create a kind of overlapping, yet subtle critique of the world and demonstrate how Celie begins to realize that “I ain't dumb” (10). The way this passage is crafted – with an abrupt, hard shift in narrative, lacking transitional language – creates the illusion of Celie's stream of consciousness. The passage transmits the sense that Celie is simply writing about unrelated moments, when, in fact, I argue that Walker is developing the critical consciousness of her character through a literary technique that will be seen again.

In the same letter, Celie offers another subtle critique, which is also marked by a juxtaposing shift in narrative. She begins to describe how Pa plans to take Celie out of school. Nettie protests and explains how Ms. Beasley, the schoolteacher thinks “Celie smart too:”

Pa say, Whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how come she have to teach school. He never look up

from cleaning his gun. Pretty soon a bunch of white mens come walking cross the yard. They have guns too. Pa git up and follow 'em. The rest of the week I vomit and dress wild game. (11)

As Celie writes about the trauma of being taken out of school, she makes a connection between the power wielded by Pa and “a bunch of white mens.” Pa exerts his patriarchal power by destroying Celie's access to school, a place that she receives fulfillment and is acknowledged as a thinking person. Pa's decision is in effect an effort to silence Celie, keep her in her place, and make her marriageable. Pa's remarks about Addie Beasley reinforce his notion that an educated woman who speaks her mind is not desirable. He cleans his gun as he makes this declaration, which illustrates the kind of destructive power his decision is meant to have on Celie. Yet, Celie still manages to place her observation of Pa in a larger context. Not only do the “white mens” show up with their guns, but “Pa git up and follow 'em” (11). Pa's masculinity becomes validated through its association with white masculinity, particularly through the use of guns. Liberation for Celie, which will be observed incrementally as the novel unfolds, will come through her resistance to black male oppression, which she cites early in the text. Though she does not explicitly name it, Celie sees and writes about how black male oppression of black women is inextricably linked to and sanctioned by white male power. Though she still struggles with claiming a subjective space for herself through these early observations, Celie begins to use her epistolary literary form to draw together events that have social and political meaning when put side by side in the text. These textual moments of juxtaposition recur throughout the novel; they are Celie's form of subtle social and political critique – her use of mama's gun.

### **“Writing” Her Baby's Name**

The experience of becoming mother to Mr.'s children eventually forces Celie outside of the insulated environment of Pa's house and front porch and into the wider world of Mr.'s house and, significantly, the town. It is in the public, economic life of the town that Celie's maternal

desire forces her to come into contact with the institutionalized racial oppression that controls her life outside the home. On a chance visit to the general store, Celie sees a young girl who she believes to be her daughter, who had been taken from her by Pa right after she was born. The girl is with another adult black woman, her adoptive mother, who is described as “a lady.” Celie sees the pair in the store and describes a maternal desire and longing that reaches back to her memories of her daughter as an infant. Celie says she saw her “baby girl” and invokes a naturalized recognition of her “I think she mine. My heart say she mine” (14). Celie expresses a maternal sweetness and concern for the girl because she senses that she is her own biological child. She recalls how she embroidered the child's name on her “daidies,” which is another kind of writing or inscription that creates a sense of self and a sense of ownership for Celie.

Interestingly, as Celie continues to describe watching her daughter and the lady in the store, she also describes the lady's exchange with the white shop clerk. The store clerk, who has been watching Celie and the lady speak to one another, rudely interrupts them and rushes the lady's purchase, because “we got other customers sides you” (15). Celie continues to write: “He snatch the cloth and thump down the bolt. He don't measure. When he think he got five yard he tare it off” (15). Celie is careful to detail in her letter the blatant disregard she observes in the clerk's treatment of the lady, who has done nothing but “speak pleasant.” The clerk's racist treatment of the black lady in the store leaves Celie diminished. She writes that after she walked out of the store: “I don't have nothing to offer and I feels poor” (15). The other woman leaves the store upset as well; when she realizes that her husband, the Reverend, is not already there to pick her up, she appears as if “she gon cry” (15). In this exchange, both black women of differing class status have had the warmth of their meeting and conversation ruined by their encounters with racism in the store.

Still, even at this low point, Celie's letter shifts the narrative to recover the dignity for the two women. Outside of the store, they each wait for their husbands, and Celie asks the name of the little girl. "She say, oh we calls her Pauline. My heart knock. Then she frown. But *I* calls her Olivia" (16). The typographical emphasis on the "I" comes from Celie, and it speaks to the way Celie perceives the sense of self that the black lady possesses by having the power to call her daughter what she wants. For Celie this revelation is a double joy because Olivia is the name that Celie gave her daughter before Pa took her away. Though the adoptive mother has another explanation of the source of the name – "don't she look like an Olivia to you?" – Celie still experiences maternal validation in this exchange through her power to name her daughter (16). Both women seem to erase, or at least ameliorate, their sense of dismissal at the clerk's counter through their mutual power to name the child, though this power is experienced separately in each woman's mind. In Celie's letter, the name conversation has the effect of recovery and healing for the women. This healing is demonstrated by the ease and freedom with which Celie and the lady laugh at a joke just moments after they discuss the name. Taken all together, the early part of the text offers a way to see Celie transform herself from the darkness, silence, and ignorance of her victimization and pregnancy into the status of mother, a status validated in part through sentimental tropes of love, care and nurturing of babies and children. Celie's experience reflects what Tate describes as heroic maternal self-transformation, the ability to "replace the social alienation inherent to racial oppression with symbolic mother love" (38).

Of course, Celie's sentimental attachment to her children is tempered by her ambivalence toward her other mothering roles, specifically her work as caregiver to Mr.'s children. Celie describes disliking Mr.'s children, who she cares for out of fear and obligation, rather than love. She writes that "I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back like patting a dog. It more like

patting a piece of wood” (31). At one point, Celie says that “just the thought of anybody getting pregnant make me want to cry” (261). Even with these attitudes toward motherhood, Celie attaches strong, positive meaning to her role as mother to her own biological children. Keeping in mind the reproductive politics I outlined in the previous section, I have tried to show how Celie's sense of herself as a mother – as problematic, thwarted, and marginalized as it is in the novel – contributes to her developing sense of self and social consciousness – the ability to see the world without “man on her eyeball.” I wanted to demonstrate how Celie's “alienated and fragmented maternity” narratively coincides with her coming to voice through writing, and how her growing awareness of her social world predates her encounters with Shug and her letters from Nettie. Celie writes and reflects throughout the novel on her arrested motherhood, but by the end of the novel, her ability to call herself a mother and free woman compliment one another.

Certainly she assumes a number of subject-forming identities – shopkeeper, home owner, friend, and lover of women – but her identity as a mother with the power to name and care for her children should also be included in Celie's subjective accomplishments. “I am so happy,” she writes in a letter to her sister Nettie, “I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children” (222). The next section on *PUSH* will show how Sapphire's novel takes the impetus toward heroic maternal self-transformation in *The Color Purple* a step further.

### **“Push, Preshecita Push”: Mapping Motherhood as Transgressive Subjectivity in Sapphire's Post-Civil Rights Dystopia**

While the role of gender and identity politics, especially the politics of black motherhood, finds itself subtly and deeply embedded in the narrative structure of *The Color Purple*, the novel *PUSH* seems to wear its politics on its sleeve. Described in book reviews as sensational, polemic, ideological and manipulative, *PUSH* has shocked readers since its debut in 1996 for its intense

depiction of the repeated victimization of a black girl named Precious Jones.<sup>15</sup> Set in 1980s Harlem, *PUSH* describes the harrowing coming-of-age that Precious endures: Rape by her father, molestation by her mother, and neglect and abuse by both. Outside of the confines of her apartment, Precious encounters hostile education and social welfare systems that figure her as another statistic of the rising black underclass. Junkies, pimps and prostitutes scatter the streets of her Harlem world like detritus; they are discarded, wasted lives that prefigure the only future Precious can imagine. That is until she becomes pregnant for the second time by her father and enters an adult literacy program. In the program, Precious not only learns the rudiments of literacy, but she becomes a poet and enters a loving community of other women who become a surrogate family to her. The emerging literacy that Sapphire traces in this novel is motivated by Precious's maternal desire; her commitment to writing tightly parallels her commitment to caring for her children. The act of childbirth – the push necessary to deliver her babies – becomes the novel's central metaphor for personal empowerment.

Sapphire crafts this maternal metaphor of empowerment against the grimmest of circumstances, and it is in this way that textures of Walker's novel can be seen showing through in Sapphire's narrative. The way that a teenaged Celie must deal with the confusion at the circumstances of her pregnancy, so too does Precious. Importantly however, Precious's motherhood remains negatively marked in the novel (and in the wider arena of critical reception and reader response). Precious has no redemptive moment where she realizes “Pa, not Pa,” as Celie does, which goes far to help the latter legitimize her experiences of maternity. Precious, who reads *The Color Purple* in her literacy class, references the importance of Celie's revelation and later asks her mother if Carl Jones really is her father. She finds out he is her biological father, which abandons Precious's motherhood in the category of incest. Precious' motherhood

remains marginalized and stigmatized because it exists in contradistinction to the bourgeois family unit. Unlike Celie who gets to claim triumphantly at the end of her story a reunited and healed, albeit alternative, family unit, Precious ends her story with further estrangement from her family and a diagnosis of HIV. Yet, Precious' manifests heroic maternal desire from a transgressive subjective space.

In this section, I will explore how *PUSH* acts as a palimpsest of *The Color Purple*, writing over and extending the imagined space for an even more radically imagined black motherhood than Alice Walker crafts in her earlier novel. Though written more than a decade apart, I argue that the texts of Walker and Sapphire respond to similar representations of black motherhood that had begun emerging in the post-Civil Rights period, which I have described and traced earlier in this chapter. I will extend from Tate's notion of heroic maternal self transformation, which operates in Walker's text, to the kind of transgressive subjectivity that I argue appears in Sapphire's work.

Tate's construction of heroic maternal self-transformation has been useful to excavate the importance of maternal desire in *The Color Purple*. Central to Tate's figuration of maternal subjectivity is a "politicization of domestic ideology" and a use of the sentimental fictional form as a means to participate in and stake claims to the cult of true womanhood, which included a right to raise and nurture one's own children. I have tried to show how Celie's writing and motherhood commingle in the expression of the kind of maternal subjectivity that Tate describes. What happens, however, when maternal subjectivity emerges from such a place of abjection and marginalization as to render it ultimately incompatible with any dominant domestic ideology? *PUSH* tests these boundaries by appalling readers with its grim images, which black attorney and critic Vaughn A. Carney said feeds white America's

morbid fascination with the most depraved, violent, misogynist, vulgar, low-life element in the African-American experience. . . I resent having my people defined by the lowest elements among us. To see the majority of African-Americans as shards of a degraded and dysfunctional monolith is hugely insulting and unfair.

Carney's perspective shows the difficulty of reading maternal heroism or empowerment within this text. However, I ultimately agree with bell hooks, who calls for a revision in criticism of black cultural products that relies strictly on the kind of politics of representation that Carney's quote suggests. She writes that "even on cultural ground, discussions of black subjectivity are often limited to the topic of representation, good and bad images, or contained by projects concerned with reclaiming and/or inventing traditions...Interestingly, both these endeavors are not in any essential way oppositional" ("Radical" 19). She explains that arguments about good/bad images reinforces the binaristic thinking inherent in the Western philosophies that have propagated racism and sexism, and tradition formation/canon formation legitimizes a high/low dichotomy that is also hegemonic.

In hooks' formation, oppositional thinking comes from artists "poised on the margins" (19). She describes herself as exemplary of this border-lying identity, but I am far more interested in the marginality of a character like Precious Jones, who lies even farther on the outside of the imagined critical community – black women in academe – within which hooks situates herself. Yet, I appreciate hooks' attention to the margins, which is where many black mothers find themselves. For Sapphire to craft a novel in the mid-1990s about the invisible/hypervisible fat, loud, ignorant, black teen welfare cheat and for her to write her story as redemptive and emancipatory is exemplary of what hooks calls "counter-hegemonic cultural practice" (22). I read Precious Jones as exemplary of a kind of transgressive or radical black maternal subjectivity that in part includes the disavowal of the white gaze and a privileging of self-recognition and self-expression.

## Quest for Literacy

Coming to voice, coming to self through writing is no small feat in the confines of Precious' world. Although she is old enough to be in the eleventh grade, she has been held back and languishes in the “ninfe” grade. She is functionally illiterate, and she finds herself inundated regularly with the tyranny of print: school files, social service files, tests, and school books. Each site of writing stands as a marker of her inadequacy and failure to “learn, catch up, be normal” (5). Precious describes her suspicion of tests: “There has always been something wrong wif the tesses. The tesses paint a picture of me wif no brain. The tesses paint a picture of me an' my muver – my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible” (30).

Though the structures of her world render her young, black, femaleness invisible to all except the police and social welfare agencies, Precious enters the novel with a strong voice. This departure marks a major difference in Sapphire's story and the literacy narrative of Celie in *The Color Purple*. Unlike Celie, Precious is not silent, and she begins her story orally, trying to explain “why I'm talkin” (3). She regularly talks back to teachers, classmates, and others that she encounters. She also presents a lively inner monologue that suggests her worldliness and own critical self-fashioning. In fact, the beginning of the story has a speakerly feel; Sapphire captures the cadences and rhythms of Precious's speech on each page. The sense of Precious's functioning voice is also exemplified through her quick wit and penchant for obscene similes, such as “she look at me like I say I wanna suck a dog's dick or some shit” (7).

Nevertheless, Precious expresses a desire to advance academically, and specifically to learn to read and write, which emerges in the narrative coextensive to her pregnancy. Impregnated for the second time by her father (as Celie was at the start of her story), Precious faces expulsion from her public high school, until a school administrator suggests that she enroll in an alternative school. Precious is not sure what an “alternative school” is or how it can help

her, but she has a feeling that it will be an opportunity for her to finally get the education that she has missed. The night before she visits the alternative school she has a dream:

I dream I'm in an elevator that's going up up up so far I think I'm dying. The elevator open and it's the coffee-cream-colored man from Spanish talk land. I recognize him from when I was having my baby bleeding on the kitchen floor. He put his hand on my forehead again and whisper, "Push, Precious, you gonna hafta *push*. (16)

Within Precious's dream it is clear how she equates learning and literacy with ascendancy and upward, progressive movement. Moving forward also means coming close to dying. To attend the alternative school will allow her the opportunity to ride that elevator "up up up" toward education, but she is fearful of coming close to death, perhaps a figurative death to the only social world that she has known. What stands out in this passage, too, is how closely Precious aligns the struggle toward education with her experience of childbirth. The Puerto Rican paramedic who helped deliver her first baby on her kitchen floor re-appears in this dream. In their real encounter, he gently touches Precious on the head and belly and tells her as she has contractions: "I want you to push, you hear me mami, when that shit hit you again, go with it and push, Preshecita. Push" (10). His return in the dream draws a parallel between the kind of intense transformation Precious fears as she embarks on her literacy quest and the kind of transformation she has endured during pregnancy and childbirth.

Sapphire makes an important link between print literacy and motherhood consistently throughout the novel: To push past the private shame of illiteracy into the public strength of literacy, even poetry, is a metamorphosis akin to the shift from the alienating experience of forced pregnancy into the empowered status of motherhood. Giving birth to her first child – who is born with Down Syndrome and is eventually placed in an institution – provides Precious a catalyst for describing how she became invisible to the world. In the hospital, just after giving birth, a swirl of memories rush her mind as she cries for her "ugly baby" and then cries for

*herself*. She mourns for her girl-self that has been devastated by the molestation and abuse she suffers in her home. She realizes how that abuse cut her off from her education. Remembering the filthy touch of her father Carl when she was in elementary school, she says:

Carl is the night and I disappear in it. And the daytime don't make no sense...What difference it make whether gingerbread house on top or bottom of the page ... I disappears from the day, I just put it all down – book, doll, jump rope, my head, myself. I don't think I look up again till EMS find me on floor. (18)

The elements of her child identity must be abandoned in order to cope with the trauma of her experience, and in the process she too abandons her head and herself. Significantly, however, the catalyst for her emergence from this nightmare world is the birth of her child.

### **Writing Herself into the World**

In her literacy class, Precious begins to make further connections between her life as a mother and her subjectivity. Clearly she has much to learn in class in order to read, but her ability to imagine herself as a mother to her new baby coincides with her burgeoning ability to write about life. Precious begins this journey to transgressive maternal identity by revealing her second pregnancy, which she had easily kept hidden. Already overweight, Precious was able to conceal her growing body. Administrators at her public school suspect that she was pregnant, but Precious denies it. She is ashamed. She also has not told her mother. She is afraid of being beaten. However, after attending literacy class for a month where she “sits in the circle” with other girls in similar circumstances, she “don't pretend I'm not pregnant no more. I let it above my neck, in my head. Not that I didn't know it before but now it's like part of me; more than something stuck in me, growing in me, making me bigger” (62). Here she is able to claim the child as part of her new, more hopeful self-concept. It is interesting how her sentence makes a double gesture toward the literal and the figurative. The child that she now accepts is “growing in me” and “making me bigger,” which makes literal reference to the biology of pregnancy.

However, the language here also suggests figurative forms of personal transformation, such as intellectual and social growth or a bigger sense of her self and her world.

She makes this clear again via her connection with her second baby, when she proudly proclaims “I bet chu one thing, I bet chu my baby can read. Bet a mutherfucker that! Betcha he ain' gonna have no dumb muver” (63). Precious holds fast to the ideal of mother and child together, growing together, getting bigger together. Her literacy is tied intimately to the baby and vice versa. She says that “soon as he git born I'ma start doing the ABCs. *This my baby*. My muver took Little Mongo but she ain't taking this one” (64, emphasis added). The imprint of Celie’s story is strong in this passage. Celie had to intuit her role as her mother because her children were kept away from her for so many years. The moment she encounters Olivia in the store is more of a feeling than a fact, because her baby had been stolen and given to another family. Precious’ confidence, however, writes over Celie’s insecurity. So instead of Celie’s “I think she mine. My heart say she mine” (14), there is Precious with “This my baby.” Precious becomes more resolved to protect her baby and raise it on her own.

She also expresses the maternal desire to have control over what and how her baby will learn. Precious takes pride in the fact that her second child will have the opportunity to learn to read. Compared to the first “ugly baby,” the second baby, the baby who will read will be the healthy, smart, hopeful child who reflects her own improvements, which she sees as inextricably linked. Raising her child is not a burden to her educational pursuits or her self-actualization, rather it is a necessity. Precious takes ownership of this education, which she wants to tailor to the specificities of the subject space she occupies as a young black woman growing up in urban America. She describes how she wants to put pictures on the wall of her baby’s room, and how she plans to read to her son each night. She even begins to teach the unborn baby the alphabet by

reading aloud. Rather than simply recite the ABCs, however, Precious writes in her barely literate script, her own version of a grade-school primer:

A is fr Afrc

(for Africa)

B is for u bae

(you baby)

C is cl w bk

(colored we black) (65)

She does the entire alphabet, including “F is Fuck,” “I I somb (somebody),” or “N nf kkk (North America America=KKK)” (65-66). The parenthetical notes are provided in the novel by Ms. Rain, the teacher who has encouraged her students to write even though they have not mastered reading and spelling skills yet. Ms. Rain has provided the opportunity for her students learn by unlearning the rules of school, what Norbese-Phillips would call the “father tongue” language that leads to anguish. Ms. Rain’s gift, so to speak, allows Precious the freedom to accept her transgressive identity and express herself freely outside of the bounds of what constitutes good written English. Precious accepts this gift, and begins to feel comfortable because she now equates education with power and creativity rather than domination and marginalization.

The dialectic between mothering as metaphor for creativity and mothering as a phenomenological experience resounds strongly in the passages above. Precious’ difficult labor acts as metaphor for her emerging literacy; the way she pushes against intersecting oppressions to claim her right to write acts as reflection of the process of giving birth. On the level of experience, Precious struggles to learn to read and write in order to provide education for her son. Each and every day she picks up a pen to write, in part because she does not want to be a “dumb muver” and in part because she realizes that she too has something important to say.

## Conclusion

*The Color Purple* and *PUSH* are two novels that emerge at different points in the post-Civil Rights Era, and even though many intellectual and popular ideologies changed during the years 1982 to 1996, ideas about hyper-reproductive, irresponsible black mothers did not change much. During this time there were many novels that placed the maternal subjectivities of black women front and center, but these two novels stand out for the way that they propose print literacy – writing – as a viable means to challenge and critique hegemonic ideas about black motherhood as well as black women’s capacity for social and political citizenship. Further, they each suggest in different registers that motherhood, particularly the desire among some black women to raise their own children, can be a privileged site of opposition, resistance and even transgression.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the historic relationships between conceptions of black and white womanhood, see Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Woman: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> My question emerges from insights made by French feminist Helene Cixous, who makes important connections between writing and female embodiment, specifically as “mother.” My question seeks to extend her observations into a more racially inflected context. Cixous’s connection between mothering, milk and subjectivity, is important, and one that is echoed in the works of other French feminists. For more background on French feminism, see *The French Feminism Reader*, edited by Kelly Oliver, and *The Modernist Madonna: The Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor*, 1-25.

<sup>3</sup> Dubey’s assertion about writing is often at odds with other major perspectives. For example, Karla F.C. Holloway situates black women’s literary tradition squarely in the realm of the oral: “Because black women’s literature is generated from a special relationship to its words, the concerns of orature and the emergence of textual language that acknowledges its oral generation must affect the critical work that considers this tradition” (69). Kevin Everod Quashie, drawing on the poetry of Norbese-Phillips and Dione Brand, describes how black women writers often view colonial languages as “untrustworthy, a vehicle of erasure, violence and separation” (133).

<sup>4</sup> The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted citizenship rights, such as due process and equal protection under the law, to black people. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted black men the right to vote.

<sup>5</sup> I am using the term “grammar” in direct reference to the way that Hortense Spillers mobilizes this term in her 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar.”

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<sup>6</sup> For background on racialized sterilization abuse and responses by women of color, see Jennifer Nelson's *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003)

<sup>7</sup> A number of scholars have discussed the patriarchal motivations of black nationalism. While this is not the totality of the movement, much black nationalist thought has organized itself around the fertility of black women as necessary to build a black nation.

<sup>8</sup> “*Media Matters Exposes Bennett*,” online posting, *Media Matters for America* 28 Sept. 2005, 21 Nov. 2005 <<http://mediamatters.org/items/200509280006>>.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Cosby, “Speech at 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration of the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court Decision,” online posting, 17 May 2004, 21 Nov. 2005 <[http://www.eightcitiesmap.com/transcript\\_bc.htm](http://www.eightcitiesmap.com/transcript_bc.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> The imperative toward novels of social protest within the African-American literary tradition has faced long-standing contention, demonstrated in foundational essays such as “Blueprint for Negro Writing” by Richard Wright, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” by Langston Hughes, George Schuyler’s “The Negro-Art Hokum,” James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” and Zora Neale Hurston’s “What White Publishers Won’t Print.” In contemporary terms, the question of the distinctive place for social and political protest or even a collective sense of blackness – via U.S. cultural nationalism or through diasporic consciousness – within newer literary work emerges as debates about the notion of “post-black.” See bell hooks “Postmodern Blackness,” “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” by Cornel West, and “New Ethnicities” by Stuart Hall.

<sup>11</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, the “Racial” Self* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1987) and *Harriet Jacobs and “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl : New Critical Essays* edited by Rafia Zafar, Deborah Garfield. (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Bobo writes that “the predominant reading, or meaning construction of *The Color Purple* is that the works [novel and film] negatively depict black people, especially black men” (333). Bobo writes that the negative reading remains “fixed” in the popular imagination, despite many interventions by readers and critics who have pursued other interpretations of the novel.

<sup>13</sup> The sexual abuse of female slaves did appear as a concern in Douglass's narrative, but it is in Jacobs text that the issue becomes of central concern offering a “feminized” form of social protest that hinged on “the individuated context of the sexually violated female slave and the morally outraged slave mother” (Tate 27-28).

<sup>14</sup> Readers familiar with this novel know that Celie discovers later that “Pa not Pa,” or rather that the man she believes to be her biological father and the father of her two children is in fact her step-father. This revelation, which arrives much later in the story, becomes a narrative turning point. Lauren Berlant has read this shift as a marking Celie's entry into consciousness because it removes the negation that was imposed upon her through her subjugation as a victim of incest and that the “new tale of paternal origins empowers Celie” (840). I want to argue that the empowerment has its origins much earlier in the text, at the point she struggles with her identity as a mother and simultaneously begins to write.

<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani wrote of PUSH in 1996: “We learn that white social workers are foolish, patronizing liberals, and that men are pigs who only think about sex. Though it's easy to understand how Precious might hold all of these views, it soon becomes clear that Precious's creator, Sapphire, is also stacking the deck.”

### CHAPTER 3

#### MAMA'S GOT THE BLUES, OR SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A CHILDLESS MOTHER: THE BLUES AS MATERNAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE IN GAYL JONES' *CORREGIDORA*

You come to hear me sing with my thighs. You come to see me open my door and sing  
with my thighs.

-- Ursa, *Corregidora*

I talk because I'm stubborn, I sing because I'm free

I talk because I'm stubborn, I sing because I'm free

My daddy's gone and left me, bound for Memphis, Tennessee

-- Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Memphis Bound Blues"

Gertrude Pridgett gave birth to countless children; so many children that naming them all would be an unenviable task. The daughter who would perhaps be regarded as the closest to her mother's heart was a woman called Bessie, but there were plenty of others: classic blues women such as Alberta Hunter and Ida Cox; folk blues singer Memphis Minnie; and even contemporary blues women such as Koko Taylor and Bonnie Rait.<sup>1</sup> Her children have written poems to her, plays about her, as dutiful children do, attempting to communicate with their long lost "Ma" across time and space.<sup>2</sup> One of those descendants, poet Al Young writes: "I'm going to cry so sweet/ & so low/ & so dangerous, / Ma, / that the message is going to reach you" (Young 14). Her children were not just those who idolized the woman who wore gold coins around her neck as she moaned her blues on stage, her children were her songs. The woman who would come to be known as Ma Rainey created a lively body of blues recordings, ninety-two in all, in a recording career that spanned just five years, from 1923 to 1928 (Lieb xii). To be sure, many of her recordings were written by a number of male composers, including her husband William "Pa" Rainey and Tommy Dorsey, but some of her most memorable and powerful songs, such as

the “Prove It On Me Blues” and “Cell Bound Blues,” are examples of her autonomous, black female voice shining through lyrically.<sup>3</sup> Gertrude “Ma” Rainey has been called the “Mother of the Blues” because she gave birth to the style standard for the classic blues woman of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: raw, gritty performances; an itinerant, artistic way of life; the ability to earn her own living to the point of amassing considerable wealth; and a brazen sexual politics.

Within the multiple incarnations of what is called the blues, the words “Mama” and “Ma” remain terms of reverence for the kind of independent black woman embodied by Rainey, even though the blues woman is unlikely to embody the traditional characteristics of “mother.” She is neither a biological childbearer, nor a domestic servant charged with the qualities of nurturance, protection and purity. The biological definition of “mother” notwithstanding, the term signifies other concepts that define the function or the status of mother. “Mother” is a protector or nurturer of a child, and for this protection she is looked up to and holds a sanctified status in most social groups. High esteem, however, should not be confused with real power or equity. Mother is always woman, and, as such, carries with her the patriarchal stigma of femaleness.<sup>4</sup> So as Elaine Hansen Tuttle notes, concealed within the semantic history of the word “mother” is a “trace of derogation, disgust, and dirtiness,” which highlights the kind of contradictions inherent in the term (3). The multiple social contradictions of the term “mother” are intensified when one looks at its derivatives. As demonstrated through the life and times of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the ambiguities of reverence and debasement encoded in the word “mother” also inhere in the terms “Ma” and “Mama,” but the latter words also include a particular racialized and sexualized history of meaning.

In almost every instance, reference to the slang term “Mama” or “Ma” is particularized to black American culture and the sexual availability of a black woman. Clarence Major’s

*Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* (1970) and its updated version, *From Juba to Jive* (1994), are devoted to cataloging black language traditions, and both texts have entries for the word “mama.” The 1970 reference simply defines “mama” as “a pretty black girl” (80), while the latter reference defines it thusly: “a male term for girlfriend or wife; any woman, any girl” and dates the usage from the 1650s to the 1990s. The word shows up in general American slang dictionaries, too, but with a distinctly racialized and sexualized cast, including “a young woman, a woman (US 1917), originally black usage;” “a very attractive woman...*cf.* sweet mama [originally and primarily black use];” and “a sexually active or promiscuous woman...*cf.* red-hot mama”<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of jazz and blues recordings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought what likely began as an insular black slang meaning into the mainstream American lexicon, and the use of terms like “mama” (or “daddy”) in the songs of Tin Pan Alley composers were seen as evidence of moral decline (Lindsay 371). Although linguists and other social observers of the time were loath to make direct racial associations to the growing sexualized meaning of the term, it is clear that “mama” was seen as “a new connotation for the once highly respectable nomenclature of the family” (Hart 243). Hart cites the 1917 recording of the song “I’m a Real Kind Mamma, Lookin’ for a Lovin’ Man” as the advent of the sexy meaning of “mama” in popular culture, but he is quick to comfort his readers with a reminder that “a ‘mama’ or ‘mammy’ need not be ‘cullud’ ” (243). His effort to efface the particularly African-American meaning of the term and its association with the black performers of classic blues and jazz music may have been a way to affirm the consumption of “race records” by white audiences, who needed to retain, on some level, a sense of their own respectability, at least in relation to blacks.

Even so, within black communities concerns around respectability have historically taken on different meanings, particularly when intra-racial class politics are added to the analysis. So while the slang terms “Ma” and “Mama” are certainly not considered “respectable” ways of addressing a black woman in middle- and upper-class black society, they do act as terms of respect within working-class black communities. The way of life of Ma Rainey as perceived by people who knew her or those who listened to her music exemplifies this sense of reverence.<sup>6</sup> Jazz musician Danny Barker describes what Rainey’s status as “Ma” meant to the musicians and audiences who enjoyed her music in the documentary *Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues*:

Ma Rainey was Ma Rainey. When you said Ma that means mother. Ma, that means the tops. That’s the boss, the shag bully of the house. Ma Rainey. She take charge. Ma. Ma Rainey coming to town. The boss blues singer, and you respect Ma. Grandma, May-Maw, Maw-Maw. That’s a mother. Someone you respect. That’s mother. Not Papa. Mama.

Barker’s reflection reinforces how the term “Ma” is used to identify black women worthy of high esteem. “Ma” was a woman in control, a boss. Blues women derived their esteem from their vocal stylings; not just their big, throaty voices, but also their way with words in comedy skits, their wicked double entendres, and perceptive monologues on stage. Daphne Duval Harrison, who writes about Rainey and other blues women in her study *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*, confirms that “fluency in language is considered a powerful tool for establishing and maintaining status in the black community. Thus a man or woman who has mastered the art of signifying, rapping, or orating can subdue any challenger without striking a blow” (Harrison 65).

The epigraphs for this chapter highlight the ways I think blues singing and performance overlap with sexuality and creativity, providing an alternative way of reading the multiple significances of maternal symbolism in black culture. Keeping in mind the layered and contextual meanings of the term “Ma,” it is important to note the ways in which it is deployed within black cultural spaces all while maintaining an ambiguous relationship with its biological

and nurturing connotations. This chapter will focus on Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* (1975) and. *Corregidora* tells the story of Ursa, a blues singer whose maternal imperative to "make generations" serves to keep the memory and history of slavery alive. Ursa's maternal quest is thwarted by a lifetime of emotional and physical abuse. After being pushed down a flight of stairs by her husband, Ursa loses the baby that she was carrying and then undergoes a hysterectomy. Her barrenness becomes the central tension in the story. Yet, as Ursa copes with her inability to give birth, she also becomes a better blues singer. The blues as an art form becomes her "baby" in the novel, which situates her in a line of real and fictionalized blues women who (pro)create through their musical artistry. Again, I am interested in highlighting the ways black maternal figures appear in contemporary texts in ways that transgress traditional modes of motherhood, and how these maternal figures use mama's gun to disrupt particular socio-political discourses that centralize black motherhood.

Extending from themes explored in Chapter 2 in which I made connections between motherhood and writing in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *PUSH*, this chapter similarly seeks to connect figurative motherhood with women's artistic creativity. I will lay the groundwork for my close reading of *Corregidora* by first detailing the feminist and womanist recuperation of blues women as feminist icons within the work of Angela Davis, Hazel Carby and Daphne Duval Harrison, who situate blues women within a framework of black feminist thought. I will extend their arguments by exploring the transgressive narrative possibilities of the figure of the "childless mother" as offered by Elaine Hansen Tuttle, E. Patrick Johnson, L.H. Stallings and others. Their insights contextualize my formulation of the blues mama as a maternal figure, an instance of a "childless mother," which will provide the theoretical vantage point from which to understand my reading of Ursa's mothering of the blues. I am interested in

exploring the multiple effects of the figure of the childless mother that link Ursa to a number of conversations within contemporary literary criticism and feminist thought that attempts to problematize concepts about gender.

Throughout *Corregidora*, Ursa links her blues singing to her sexuality and to the reproductive potential of her body. For her, song is not simply a matter of voice, but rather song is akin to sexual expression. Ursa says, in the first epigraph to this chapter, that she “sings with [her] thighs” (67). Thighs can be read an erogenous zone as well as kind of figurative location associated with reproduction. In everyday speech, children are referred to as the “fruit of the loins.” Other than the vagina, the loins, or thighs, are the only other bodily location strongly associated with childbirth. Therefore, I find it significant that Ursa’s song emerges from the thighs rather than simply her mouth. I acknowledge this wording as an overlap between sexual and creative self-expression that I see working throughout this novel.

The next epigraph is a portion of the lyrics of the “Memphis Bound Blues,” which offers an important causal relationship between concepts of singing and freedom. The song, recorded in 1925 by Rainey, was written by Tommy Dorsey, a long-time pianist and arranger for the Rainey (Lieb x). Despite its male authorship, the song provides some insight into the way the oral expressive form of singing can act as a gesture of liberation for the singer. Rainey intones Dorsey’s lyrics, singing that she “talks because she’s stubborn,” but she “sings because she is free,” which I think is an important distinction for my project. The act of singing is equated with freedom.

To be sure, the issue of male authorship of lyrics sung by women highlights important concerns about gender and power, yet I agree with Ma Rainey’s biographer, Sandra Lieb when she notes that “it is more useful to assume that the female protagonist who recurs in Ma Rainey’s

songs represents black women and their general experience” (Lieb 53).<sup>7</sup> Cultural and literary critic Hortense Spillers takes this point further in her essay “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words.” There, Spillers addresses the multiple ways agency, particularly sexual agency, is expressed in black women’s creative expression:

The singer is likely closer to the poetry of black female sexual experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music, but in the sense of dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the vocalist herself embodies...She is, in the moment of performance, the primary subject of her own invention. Her sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and, often, the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers. (165-167)

Therefore, it seems that women singers express their sexuality and creativity not only through “the words of her music,” which may have been penned by men, but also through their interpretation of those lyrics, their vocal performance styles. These commingled elements have the power to control audience reception and perception. I am attracted to Ma Rainey’s “Memphis Bound Blues” because I think it privileges singing as a kind of liberatory vocal expression to which blues women, in particular, have access. This privileging of song will be essential to my argument about Ursa’s blues singing later in this chapter.

Also important to my argument are the narrative connections among sexuality, maternity and artistic creativity, which I identify as critiques of hegemonic discourses of family and nation, particularly black nationalist formations. To be sure, many black women critique motherhood on the basis of patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions about the naturalized purposes of women’s bodies, a critique they share with mainstream white feminists, however, I read Jones’ work as a specific refutation of black cultural nationalist ideologies that fixed black women’s identities within the limits of their reproductive roles in the transmittal of cultural memory. By focusing on the commingling of working-class black linguistic and oral traditions and the lasting cultural significance of the figure of the blues mama, I want to explore how blues women

demonstrate a radical reimagining of the concept of motherhood that disrupts the link between gender and biological determinism necessary for the reproduction of nationalist ideologies. Using Holloway's processes of revision, remembrance and recursion, I am arguing that the cultural production of dozens of black women blues artists have left a unique residue on the idea of mothering; to mother can be thought of as a kind of creative function that relies upon sexuality and artistic output rather than biological childbearing.

### **'A Woman Who Knows Her Way Around:' Black Feminist Readings of the Blues Women**

Blues has long been an influential trope in the study of black literature and culture. In 1949, Ralph Ellison used the blues to explain the "near tragic, near comic lyricism" of Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* (Ellison 78). Amiri Baraka defined the blues as the expression of unapologetic black difference, the cultural refusal of assimilation in his *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963). Houston Baker created a theoretical framework for "blues criticism," by identifying a "vibrant network" of blues inflections and vernacular themes in the African-American literary tradition, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984). Gayl Jones explored the use of blues motifs and rhythms in African-American literature in her text *Liberating Voices* (1991). Of course, the steady attention paid by the literary world toward the blues, particularly its most popular incarnation as the "classic blues" of the 1920s, has not gone without criticism.<sup>8</sup> Blues historian Paul Oliver, for example, has troubled the legitimacy of the blues-literature connection, and has expressed his skepticism about the relevance of blues in contemporary black culture because "I don't think blues has any significance for the black community as a whole, as gospel still has" (5).

Yet, far from fading from importance, the classic blues, as a music and a metaphor, continues to circulate throughout African-American culture, from contemporary literary scholarship to black popular culture. Examples include August Wilson's celebrated play "Ma

Rainey's Black Bottom" (1982) and Suzan Lori Parks' novel *Getting Mother's Body* (2004). Within popular culture, the blues have popped up in the recent staging of "The Color Purple" on Broadway. Even hip-hop artist Nas makes a connection between hip-hop and the blues in his song "Bridging the Gap" (2004), which he performs with his father, jazz musician Olu Dara. In the song, Nas raps about the connection between his career as a hip-hop artist and earlier forms of black music, including the blues. He sings: "From blues to street hop, it don't stop." The song, which samples a guitar and harmonica riff from Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf's "Mannish Boy," was also accompanied by a music video that makes clear visual links to classic blues visual style. In the world of academia, literary scholar Cheryl Wall turns to the blues, specifically the technique of "worrying the line" as a metaphor for the ways in which black women writers imagine narratives of family and history through techniques of "repetition with a difference" or, rather, through repetitive and recurring vernacular expressions in her text *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005).

Within this body of literary-blues studies, a number of black feminist scholars have specifically turned to the image of the "classic blues woman" as a figure of female resistance and empowerment.<sup>9</sup> Exemplified by the lives of real women like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Billie Holiday, the figure of the "blues woman" still permeates late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century black writing. Detailing the feminism of blues women, however, remains a complicated project. Blues women were not feminist in the ways that we think of feminism today in its academic or even popular incarnations. Yet, blues women's claims to female autonomy, particularly sexual and financial independence, gesture toward a distinctly feminist or even womanist sensibility. In this section, I provide a simplified history of the blues in order to show how female performers rose to prominence in the 1920s, and then I will use the

work of Angela Y. Davis and Hazel V. Carby to summarize a number of approaches used to understand the feminist contours of blues women, in order to lay a foundation for my reading of blues women in literature later in this chapter.

### **The Classic Blues Era**

Blues music is African-American music, and, despite its multiple regional and stylistic incarnations, it is a distinct art form that emerged from black life in the antebellum South. Blues scholar Paul Oliver notes this unifying quality of the blues when he writes that the blues is not “a music of state and county lines or river boundaries, but of a people” (39). Most blues scholars agree with Oliver and trace the signature elements of blues music to cotton field hollers, spirituals, banjo music and other work songs that could be heard sung by men across the region – in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas – in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (25). The enduring image of the wandering folk bluesman, an earthy, hard-drinking man armed with nothing more than a harmonica or a guitar, comes out of this folk tradition, also known as the “country blues.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Devil’s Music: The History of the Blues*, Giles Oakley observes that

the principal theme of the country blues, and probably all blues, is the sexual relationship. Almost all other themes ... sooner or later reverts to the central concern. Most frequently the core of the relationship is seen as inherently unstable, transient, but with infinite scope for pleasure and exultation in success, or pain and torment in failure. (55)

The combination of blues men’s frequenting of juke joints, honky tonks and barrelhouses and the sexual themes of their music went far to establish the blues as “sinful” in the eyes of the church (and sometimes simultaneously forbidden and alluring to white mainstream audiences).

The dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a shift from the provincial spread of country blues to the rapid national popularity of classic blues, a style dominated by female performers who combined folk blues songs with vaudeville performance elements – humor, lavish costuming, complicated stage sets. Black women pioneered these adaptations. Taking off on the image of the

roaming, independent bluesman, these blues women also created images as performers that “employed the bragging, signifying language of males to boast of fine physical attributes and high-powered sexual ability” (Harrison 106). The raunchiness of this “dirty blues” placed its performers even farther outside of the realm of respectability than their male counterparts. Where bluesmen were expected to grapple with risqué issues in their music, black women were expected to approximate images of white womanhood that would prohibit their discussion of certain topics within their performances. Yet, “the themes of women’s blues lyrics are generally the same as those of men’s – infidelity, alienation, loneliness, despondency, death, poverty, injustice, love, and sex” (65). Transgression of gender expectations – women behaving like men or taking on so-called masculine characteristics – is an important aspect of the classic blues era.

In her influential study, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis writes that the recorded performances of blues women “divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class black communities” (xi). Rather than engage in a problematic feminist recuperation of these women, Davis embarks upon a narrower project. She is looking for “hints of feminist attitudes” that will illuminate various forms of social consciousness in the past and present (xi). Significantly, Davis demonstrates how the blues emerged as a popular music form that voiced the social and sexual realities of newly emancipated black people. Still faced with many of the same social, legal, and economic realities of enslavement, newly emancipated black folks expressed their sense of freedom in the realm of personal relationships and sexuality. In opposition to the spirituals, which promised heavenly reward for a life of piety, sacrifice and struggle, the blues grappled with the here and now, the search for relief from racism and economic exploitation through sex and love. Blues, therefore, became the secular art form that dominated post-slavery life as an articulation of working-class desire.

Women were central to the rise of the blues as popular music, and their songs focused even more than men's on concerns of love and sexuality (Davis 11). What is remarkable about the songs and the blues women who sang them are the ways that both critique popular, sentimental notions of love, marriage and domesticity that circulated among middle-class whites as well as among middle-class blacks. Their songs mocked traditional ideas about marriage, and highlighted the clash that women experienced within this institution. Their performances were also highly sexualized, filled with carnal innuendo and performed with wanton sensuality. Taken together, the songs and performances troubled the stark boundaries of masculinity and femininity espoused in the dominant culture. Blues women pursued sex, repudiated monogamy, and mocked domesticity in ways that have been traditionally attributed to men. Davis identifies these songs and performances as the "beginnings of an oppositional attitude toward patriarchal ideology" (18).

While Davis provides an important feminist archaeology of blues women and their radical performance of sexuality and sensuality, Hazel Carby sets out to consider the *representations* of black women's sexuality in other cultural contexts, in order to assert "an empowered presence" that does not capitulate to images of the pious, respectable, asexual black woman (747). The sexual autonomy of blues women and their dominance of the public sphere of blues performance can be read as a kind of embodiment of masculinity. Ma Rainey famously sang about wearing clothes and talking to women "just like any old man" in her song "Prove it on Me Blues." Rainey and Bessie Smith both sang about the "Jail House Blues," in which the singer mourns her incarceration for a violent act against a former lover. Smith sings about her hard-drinking ways in the song "Me and My Gin," in which she intones: "Stay 'way from me 'cause I'm in my sin/ Stay 'way from me 'cause I'm in my sin/ If this place gets raided, it's me

and my gin” (qtd. in Davis 310). Blues women were considered tough, no-nonsense women. Though they sang often of depression over lost loves, many of their songs articulated a desire for independence, their propensity for violence, and drinking. Jones accounts for these perceptions of blues women in *Corregidora*, aligning Ursa’s blues woman identity with her growing independence from not only the regime of patriarchal marriage but also from the confines of Christian piety.

### **Validating Gender Play**

Interestingly, however, Ursa is not initially a proper blues woman in the novel even though she began singing as a teen in her Kentucky hometown. Jones toggles back and forth between Ursa’s blues past and present in a temporally looping narrative, which gives the novel a ragged, disjointed feel. Key moments in the narrative are not plotted along smoothly; transitions from episode to episode are often jarring and disorienting. The content of Ursa’s current experiences rub up against her abrasive memories. In a flashback, Ursa recalls how she first met her husband Mutt. He would come to Happy’s Café to hear her sing. After her set one night, he approaches her and asks her what she wants to drink. She answers “beer,” to which he replies “Nothing harder? You give the impression of liking bourbon” (148). Ursa stays silent during Mutt’s questioning. More than once, he questions her “hardness,” saying “You try to sing hard, but you not hard” and “Naw, you ain’t no hard woman” (148). Ursa finally replies to Mutt:

‘I know my way around,’ I said. I don’t even know why I said it, it was just like it just came out. I wasn’t even sure it was true. It was just that I was singing in a place where a woman would know her way around. (149).

The repeated invocation of “hardness” alludes to the perceptions of masculinity that are embodied within the blues woman. “Hard” certainly connotes “tough” or “rugged,” but it also importantly signals toward the symbolism of male sexual arousal. Mutt’s observation of Ursa, her lack of “hardness” threatens her blues woman identity because she is not masculine enough.

Her initial silence in response to his taunting reflects her unease because of his teasing, particularly because he refuses to validate her “hardness.” The conference of gender authenticity must be sanctioned by the individual who is supposed to be “real,” in this case, the real man, Mutt. To be called “hard” by another woman means less than having that quality validated by a man.

Ursa is taken aback by Mutt’s questions. Until this point, she imagined herself as a rebellious blues woman, having rejected her mother’s Christian values in order to live the life of a singer. Ursa’s mother never approved of her singing the blues because it was the “devil’s music” (146). As Mutt continues to taunt her, Ursa finally retorts “I know my way around,” a euphemism for worldly experience. Yet, she admits that she is not really confident that she does “know her way around.” However, because she is a blues woman, she felt that she should in fact be more experienced. Jones seems to situate Ursa’s inauthentic performance of a blues woman, particularly her inability to confer masculine qualities, in this passage in order to later juxtapose Ursa’s development into a true blues singer, a “hard” woman. The idea of a hard woman describes a kind of gender displacement that the figure of the blues woman signifies.

Interestingly, L.H. Stallings notes that some actual blues women, including Bessie Smith, performed in drag, in part to reduce “the risk of ... being seen solely as sexual objects” (130). Stallings goes on to say that this gender play “creates formulations of Black females as radical sexual subjects who can control and manipulate their markers of agency without becoming sexual objects” (130). Ursa, however, has not yet achieved this level of gender play in her narrative, nor has she been able to situate herself outside of the framework of sexualized object. She has not become the “radical sexual subject” that Stallings and Davis suggest as possible for the blues woman. Yet, as Ursa proceeds through the narrative, the radical possibilities of her

blues woman subjectivity intensify. I argue that the critical linchpin to this development is Ursa's loss of reproductive capacity, her inability to "make generations" for not only her husband, but also for her matrilineal ancestors who have shackled her to a dysfunctional expectation of child bearing. Jones enacts Ursa's loss of fertility on the first page of the novel as if to foreground and underscore its importance to the development of her character. Ursa's barrenness allows her to become the aforementioned gender-transgressing blues woman, a woman I am also calling the "blues mama."

### **The Blues Mama as the Childless Mother: Rejection , Disruption and Displacement of Nationalist Conceptions of Family**

In this section, I attempt to account for a variety of narratives of the "childless mother" in order to situate my observations about blues women and their childlessness within a larger framework of maternal symbolism that operates outside of the confines of hegemonic femininity and domesticity. These alternate narratives come from a number of locations – black gay male communities, black female queer culture, and feminist literary criticism. Yet they each seem to be activated by an interest in problematizing normative constructions of gender and sexuality. E. Patrick Johnson, for example, focuses on vernacular performances of femininity and domesticity in black and Latino gay male communities in which gay men "disrupt the idealization of the nuclear family and cultural logic of sexual citizenship as lodged in 'normative' sexuality" (77). Johnson argues that by investing the word "mother" with new meaning through their queer performances, black gay men enact a transgressive politics that is not about repudiating the heterosexual, but rather it is about expanding the ideologies of family to include those outside of the nuclear framework. Johnson uses the film *Paris is Burning* to illustrate the ways in which "mothers," the leaders of the glamorous ball houses of gay Harlem, enact this transgression. He goes on to discuss a very specific type of mother that black gay male culture appropriates; it is

not simply the universal mother who is nurturing, kind, hard-working and dedicated. Their appropriation draws on the “black church mother:” prim and proper, yet also sexy and elegant, etc. (98). In this instance, the conception of the “childless mother” exists in tandem with the male body, destabilizing the presumption that mother is always female.

I am using the oxymoron of a “childless mother” because it decouples the naturalized link between mother and child in the sense that it suggests that the presumed object of the mother does not have to be a biological child. Alternately, the childless mother may indeed have a biological child or children, but does not perform the expected functions of mother, such as nurturing or other daily child-care tasks. Narratives of the childless mother can disrupt what Sara Ruddick describes as the relational view of the mother in which there is “no concept of *mother*, unless there is concept of *child*”. Undermining this relational concept does not, however, lead to a seamless inversion of the mother-as-object paradigm to a mother-as-subject. Subversion of conventional maternal identities typically generates an ambivalence rather than a sense of totalizing empowerment. I am in no way interested in looking for or advancing so-called “positive” maternal representations nor am I involved in any particular recuperative project around motherhood. Instead I am interested in exploring the multiple effects of the figure of the childless mother that link her to a number of conversations within contemporary literary criticism and feminist thought that attempts to problematize our concepts about gender.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen uses a psychoanalytic approach to identify what she calls the “mother without child.” The mother without child encompasses biological mothers who experience the traumatic loss of a child or children – through infanticide, adoption, abandonment or state interference – as well as a host of other ambiguous situations, including stillbirth, murder of another woman’s child, and a woman who discovers she has clones (16). Hansen’s organizing

trope of “mother without child” is an important one in that it attempts to recognize a growing body of work by women writers who have approached the meaning of mother outside of the established symbolic order. Importantly, Hansen eschews the impulse to totalize her reading of these narratives, explaining that the meaning of mother-without-child “has to be constructed locally, specifically, in particular contexts” (17). Her observations also foreground the ways in which women of marginalized groups – black women, Latinas, Native American women, and lesbians – have historically already worked outside of Eurocentric narratives of motherhood, recognizing that the mother without child, or what I am calling the childless mother, “has historically been the brutal norm rather than the tragic exception” in the works of particular women (19).

Laura Doyle also sets her sights on a number of characters who might be considered childless mothers in *Bordering on the Body*, which examines several 20<sup>th</sup> century texts that present racialized mother figures whose narratives come up against late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific and eugenicist arguments. Doyle is interested in how particular experimental narratives undermine eugenicist ideologies, which hold the mother accountable for, among other things, racial purity and group identity. Looking at novels, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Doyle argues that “the nonchronological, interruptive or arabesque forms of modern experimental fiction reflect narrative efforts to disengage the mother from her function as sexual-racial matrix of group identity” (Doyle 4).

Madhu Dubey makes a similar point in her reading of *Corregidora*. She argues that Jones sets up a “serious challenge” to black nationalist and Black Aesthetic ideology by writing Ursa outside of the framework of biological childbearing (72). Dubey notes that Jones engages in a pointed subversion of racial patriarchy through Ursa, despite the fact that there were a few critics

who attempted to recover *Corregidora* into the codes of the Black Aesthetic in ways that were impossible for Jones next novel, *Eva's Man*. Indeed, the narrative focus of *Corregidora* – a dysfunctional matriarchy established at the hand of a brutal slaveowner – can fit within most general cultural nationalist readings. On one level, the novel stages an important narrative within black nationalist ideology, which correctly identifies the atrocities of enslavement and white supremacy as a persistent elements of black experience. Black women were victims of sexual violence as enslaved women and used as breeders for the slave economy. However, black nationalist ideologies sought to recuperate their reproductive exploitation through a problematic adoption of hetero-patriarchal notions of family life and idealized (African) womanhood. Importantly, *Corregidora* explores a black feminine identity that “exceeds the nationalist definition” (Dubey 13).

The novel offers a space for critiquing nationalist reproductive ideologies, and via the character of Ursa, one is repeatedly presented with examples of problems with the social construction of biological motherhood. So even though much of the novel is concerned with Ursa's grief at the loss of her ability to “make generations,” the novel intervenes by recalling repeated moments of biological mothering that are filled with guilt, pain, loss, and rupture. There are three embedded stories that demonstrate this intervention: details about Ursa's mother, Mama, the memory of Ursa's best friend May Alice, who becomes pregnant as a young girl, and the story of the Melrose woman, who commits suicide after becoming pregnant. This trio of subplots collectively act to problematize biological motherhood within the narrative. Each situation ends tragically for the women who have sacrificed self and sanity at the altar of biological motherhood. Ursa's recollections of these events help shift her initial grief at her barrenness to an alternate understanding of the maternal imperative. Dubey asserts that through Ursa's “memories

of pain and confinement associated with motherhood, [she] is finally able to accept the loss of her own womb, which she now sees as a source of oppression as well as of limited power” (Dubey 79).

Jones catalyzes Ursa’s ultimate rejection of her maternal mandate through a dream sequence. Left with nothing but the nightmare stories from her Gram and Great Gram, Ursa explores her feelings about childbirth through her dreams. Jones centralizes the importance of these moments by printing the content of the dreams in italics. During Ursa’s recuperation from her hospital stay after her hysterectomy, she dreams about giving birth:

*I dreamed that my belly was swollen and restless, and I lay without moving, gave birth without struggle, without feeling. But my eyes never turned to my feet. I never saw what squatted between my knees. But I felt the humming and beating of wings and claws in my thighs. And I felt a stiff penis inside me... Who are you? Who have I born? His hair was like white wings, and we were united at birth. (77)*

Ursa’s swollen belly suggests the memory of the child that she was pregnant with at the time Mutt pushed her down the stairs, the child that would have allowed her to fulfill her mandate to “make generations.” In the dream, her hesitance at seeing the child, demonstrated by her refusal to turn her eyes to her feet, adds to the ominous feeling of her birthing moment. Ursa expects the result of her labor to be horrific. Without looking, she feels the animal-like presence of her “child” that moved as if it had wings and claws. Suddenly, she also feels the intrusion of an erect penis, which she discovers is Corregidora, the Portuguese slaveholder who had raped both Gram and Great Gram. Ursa speaks to her child-father, Corregidora, who tells her that she is “one of *his* women” (77 emphasis added). Ursa denies Corregidora’s claim, and then imagines that Great Gram joins the conversation and asks her “where’s the next generation?” Ursa answers: “Hush.” Here, Ursa refuses her forefather *and* foremother, who, though they have vastly different experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed, ultimately share a similar imperative for Ursa, that she must remain emotionally and spiritually bound to her painful past. In the dream,

Corregidora and Great Gram join together to enforce the requirements of racial patriarchy, which Jones carefully shows can be delivered through both the male and female line. I think it is important to note that Ursa rejects her conscription within the confines of biological motherhood because, at first glance, one may simply dismiss her childlessness as an act not of her own will. In other words, because she was involuntarily made barren, her understanding of her displacement of motherhood is less authentic or not an example of an authorizing subjectivity. I argue, however, that Jones situates Ursa's rejection of the childbearing imperative somewhere in between the biological and the psychological. Certainly, Ursa's surgery came as a result of an abusive accident, but the accident and its effects have been situated within a narrative that is laden with skepticism and even contempt for the binding nature of mandated motherhood.

What emerges, then, is a different conception of motherhood. Ursa is a childless mother, and like the blues women discussed earlier in this chapter, the childless mother sits at the precipice gender transgression. So, how do I intend to link my observations about blues women to this idea of a blues mama, a childless mother who (pro)creates and nurtures outside of the hegemonic family structure? I will return to an observation made by Angela Davis to recall how mothering was thought among blues women. Davis points out that in the heyday of classic blues performance "most black heterosexual couples – married or not – had children. However, "blues women rarely sang about mothers, fathers, and children" (13). She continues:

The absence of the mother figure in the blues does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such, but rather suggests that blues women found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives. The female figures evoked in women's blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed. (13)

Davis' observation is important, yet I would like to extend it so that it focuses not so much an "absence" of the mother figure, but rather on the presence of a transgressive mother figure that functions outside of traditional gender norms: the blues mama. Certainly, blues mamas to some

extent were “independent women free of domestic orthodoxy,” and in many cases they rejected, or were at least ambivalent about, the assigned roles and behaviors of femininity. Yet, because they possessed and even flaunted a maternal nomenclature, their lives, lyrics and performances allowed for a maternal counter-narrative to develop that situated their music and performance style as their “children.” In this final section, I will further develop my concept of the blues mama through a look at the development of voice – particularly the singing voice – as an integral aspect of black women’s fiction that connects subjectivity, sexuality and survival.

### **Motherhood as ‘Umbilicus between Language and Creation’**

Hazel Carby turns to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to juxtapose black women’s novels that linked the destiny of the black literary heroine with the collective struggle of the community to the narratives of autonomy, sexuality and power of the classic blues women. Drawing on the observations of poet, novelist and essayist Sherley Ann Williams, Carby emphasizes the ways classic blues women use “song to create reflection and create an atmosphere for analysis to take place” (750). The analysis that Carby writes about is the kind of evaluation of communal black experience in the Jim Crow era. In other words, blues women worked from a sense of collective blackness, black experience(s) that included their changing sexual relations, in order to craft – through lyrics and performance style – a specific artistic product. For these reasons, Carby notes how “the woman blues singer remains an important part of our 20<sup>th</sup>-century black cultural reconstruction” (758). The artistry and politics of the blues women have been discussed here and by other writers at length, but here I am interested in linking Carby’s observations with a metaphor Karla F.C. Holloway uses in her text *Moorings and Metaphors*, in which she writes that motherhood in black women’s fiction acts as “an umbilicus between language and creation.” I contend that Ursa – involuntarily barren, but also aware of the limitations of her maternal mandate – becomes a real “hard woman,” a blues mama, who demonstrates her sense of freedom

through her song writing and performance, and because of this she is ultimately able to reclaim her sexuality.

For Ursa, singing the blues provides the fullest expression of her self. It helps her to “explain what [she] can’t explain” (56). Since her childhood she had been listening to intense and explicit descriptions of the rape and sexual exploitation suffered by her Gram and Great Gram at the hands of Corregidora on a plantation in Brazil. Ursa’s mother, Mama, had also been raised listening to these histories, and like her mother, Ursa’s ability to experience sexual intimacy was thwarted by this obsessive telling and re-telling. Ursa turns to song as an outlet for the trauma, coping with not only the pain of hearing the stories told but also for being mandated to tell the stories herself to protect the history from being erased as if it never happened. Singing became a means for her own attempts at reconciliation and healing. Ursa tells her mother, who forbade her to sing, that “Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words” (66). In a memory, Ursa recalls Mama’s exhortation that “songs are devils...the voice is a devil” (53). Ursa replies to her mother: “But still I’ll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals. His pussy” (54).

Significantly, the distinction between singing and talking is highlighted in this passage, and the distinction works in a way similar to the lyrics in “Memphis Bound Blues.” Rainey intones in the song: “I talk because I’m stubborn, I sing because I’m free.” Ursa finds an alternative way of dealing with her trauma than her mother, who simply “talked it,” presumably within the confines of Christian theology. Instead Ursa defiantly insists upon singing as her version of testifying, her way of keeping the stories alive, but crafted on her own terms. Again, I see this narrative strand as Jones’ repudiation of black nationalist and Black Aesthetic

proscription. While men within these movements very readily asserted that the histories of black people needed to be known and told in order to raise the consciousness of the black community, they insisted upon a “right” way to do it. The notion of a black aesthetic, while politically astute and important for liberation movements of the time, enacted a stranglehold on black writers and artists who dared work outside of its bounds. I see a complicated similarity between that proscription and Mama’s stifling of Ursa’s song. Mama seems to be telling Ursa “this is not how it is supposed to be done, it is not respectable.” Yet, Ursa is compelled toward song anyway, equating her blues performance with the experience and practice of freedom.

Furthermore, Ursa’s need to explain her sense of entrapment or enclosure by her family history is also described in the text in the language of childbearing. She continues her memory conversation with Mama, who asks her where the words to the songs came from. Ursa answers

*‘I got them from you.’*

*Then let me give witness the only way I can. I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it’s time to give witness, I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I’ll stain their hands. (54)*

Ursa tells her mother that her blues song is nothing more than the words and images that she had been raised on come to life. The only way she can “give witness” is through the act of singing, and then she also considers making “a fetus out of grounds of coffee.” This coffee-ground fetus would serve to blind her, leaving her with nothing but her singing voice. It is as if she must give birth to her music, a fetus that will somehow bear witness to the pain she has been forced to endure. This kind of childbirth, like the dream she had where she gave birth to Corregidora, do not participate in the typical symbolism of motherhood. Instead, like the narratives explored by Hansen in *Mother without Child*, Ursa’s childbirth scenarios are grim and disturbing.

The traditional symbolism of motherhood would force Ursa to remain tethered to the painful memories of her family’s past. “I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on

my mother's tiddies. In her milk" (77). Ugly memories contaminate even the most nurturing product of childbirth – milk – and this observation, returning to Helene Cixous, begs the question of what happens when women's "white ink" is damaged. What metaphors for women's creative articulation come to bear under these circumstances? In this text, it is Ursa's blues singing that she bears, and she offers a refusal of the past by saying "Let no one pollute my music" (77). Ursa's declaration illustrates the complex network of association between motherhood and music in this novel. Ursa says that her mother's milk was contaminated with the past, but instead of worrying about the contamination of her milk, which she can no longer produce, she seeks to protect her music. Yet even this observation denies the complexity of Jones' work; music is more than a simple substitution or replacement for motherhood, which has now been rendered impossible for Ursa. Music and childbirth are synonymous, an interchangeable creative output that Ursa already had access to prior to her barrenness. Music is an alternative to motherhood, not a substitution. This nuance is significant because I do not want to argue that Ursa's blues songs simply step in when Ursa's fertility is impaired, thereby leaving motherhood as the primary and preferred creative outlet for this black female character. Rather, I read Ursa's blues singing as an already productive, generative component of her life prior to her fall. The fall only serves to remove the biological mandate that had obscured Ursa's blues creativity from her consciousness. Without this biological imperative, imposed through the dream by both Corregidora and Great Gram, Ursa's blues songs and her voice become energized and enhanced. She becomes able to use her mama's gun.

### **Conclusion**

Interestingly, because of her rejection of many controlling gender norms, the blues mama has become iconic in black women's literary tradition as well as within black feminist and womanist criticism as an exemplar of a number of traditions of black female empowerment that

exist within African-American communities. The blues function as a formal leitmotif for a number of black women writers to explore a kind of mothering that does not involve a biological child, or any child or other person, for that matter. “Childless mothers” appear in a number of texts, including Shug Avery in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Gayl Jones novels *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man*. In this chapter I have considered the development and persistence of a particular maternal figure, the “blues mama,” in contemporary African-American culture, particularly her literary depiction, because I am interested in the way this recurrent figure disrupts gender categories through her multi-voiced performance of masculinity and femininity – her use of mama’s gun – all while she remains symbolically connected to the terms “Mama” and “Ma.” There may be a deeper link between blues women and the lexicon of “mama” that can provide a way of reading blues themes and performance in black women’s novels as counter-narratives to biological mothering that function as a refusal of childbearing for the (black) nation.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It is not clear whether Gertrude “Ma Rainey” Pridgett personally trained Bessie Smith as many oral histories assert, but Rainey’s influence on Smith’s style and career is undeniable. Other prominent classic blues women of the 1920s, including Alberta Hunter and Ida Cox, certainly adopted Rainey’s pioneering adaptation of folk blues singing and vaudeville performance to great success. Despite her roots in the male-dominated folk blues tradition, Memphis Minnie also acknowledged Rainey as an influence. Minnie wrote and recorded a blues tribute called “Ma Rainey,” in 1940, a year after Rainey’s death, which included the lines: “People it sure look lonesome since Ma Rainey been gone/ But she left little Minnie to carry the good word on.” Contemporary blues women such as Bonnie Rait and Koko Taylor have been noted for their incorporation of classic blues numbers made popular by Rainey and others in their live performances. Accounting for Ma Rainey’s multiple influences on the development of women’s blues traditions may be an endless task. For more on Rainey’s impact on the blues, see Sandra Lieb’s *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*; Hettie Jones’ *Big Star Fallin’ Mama: Five Women in Black Music*, and the documentary “Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues.”

<sup>2</sup> Outside of the blues tradition, Rainey and her impact on the blues has been cataloged in a number of literary texts. August Wilson’s play “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” describes xxx. Novelist, poet, and scholar Sherley Anne Williams often used blues phrasing in her poetry, most prominently in her 1982 collection *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*.

<sup>3</sup> Ma Rainey refers to her sexual relationships with women in the song “Prove It On Me Blues” singing: “Wear my clothes just like any old fan/ Talk to the gals just like any old man/ ‘Cause they say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me/ Sure got to prove it on me.” In the “Cell Bound Blues,” she sings about a fight she has with her man in which “I took my gun in my right hand,/ ‘Hold him, folks, I don’t wanta kill my man./’ When I did that, he hit me ‘cross my head/ First shot fired, my man fell dead.”

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<sup>4</sup> Feminist anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner joins other second-wave feminists in linking what she identifies as the “universal” subordination of women to their physiology. In Ortner’s influential essay, “Is Female to Man as Nature is to Culture?” she writes that female bodily functions associated with motherhood – pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, menstruation – as well as her domestic roles keep women more closely associated with “nature.” Within this equation, “nature” is to be dominated by “culture,” the purview of men. From this vantage point, a number of second-wave feminists, such as Simone deBeauvoir, sought to repudiate motherhood as the indivisible sign of patriarchal domination. While I find Ortner’s efforts to universalize cultural ideologies of womanhood problematic, her essay is useful in making the distinction between women’s high status in particular cultural expressions and concepts of gender equity.

<sup>5</sup> The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, Volume II, Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor New York; Routledge 2006. (1260). Slang and Euphemism Richard A. Spears New York: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc. 1981 (244). Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang John Ayto and John Simpson Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992 (142)

<sup>6</sup> Recently, even the word “mommy” has joined this semantic legacy, turning up in hip-hop lyrics as a reference to a female sexual partner or an attractive woman who takes care of herself. Hip-hop songwriter and performer Missy Elliott defines “mommy” as “the boss” in a 2004 song that describes a sexually aggressive and manipulative woman who is able to control men for her economic and sexual gain. See Missy Elliott’s “Mommy.” *The Cookbook*. Atlantic Records, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Blues singer KoKo Taylor talks about how her performances are not about her specific experiences. Instead, she says she tries to capture emotions in her song that may be shared by her audiences. She says in *Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues*: “I’m thinking about people in general everyday living...Now that shoe might not fit my feet, you know what I’m saying? Might not fit your feet, but that shoe do fit somebody feet. It’s some women out there really think, really feels the way that I’m singing about, what I’m talking about in this song. These are the words she would like to say.”

<sup>8</sup> Blues scholars divide blues music into various, often contested, categories. Classic blues describes a blues style that combines both folk blues, minstrel show traditions, and popular song forms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Classic blues also typically refers to the style that has become associated with women singers, which was also some of the first black music that was recorded and broadcast via radio.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, there do not seem to be any book-length studies devoted the feminist implications of the performances of contemporary blues women. Blues singers such as Koko Taylor and Etta James, who have performed since the 1950s and 60s, and newer artists, such as Shemekia Copeland and Zora Young, have carried on in the blues traditions within the past 20 years. These artists have carried on traditions established by the classic blues women, but their work has also been categorized differently – Chicago blues, rhythm and blues or even rock and roll. The lack of attention paid to blues women of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests an area worthier of further inquiry.

<sup>10</sup> The blues as a term is used as a catch-all for music forms that follow a basic 12-bar form and an AAB lyric structure. However, within this basic definition there is quite a bit of variation as a result of regional tastes, differences in audience, and shifting trends in popular music. Folk or country blues, for example, are terms used to describe the sound and style of musicians such as Howlin Wolf and Leadbelly. Other blues styles include Texas blues, urban blues, Piedmont blues, white country blues, Chicago blues. The classic blues, or dirty blues, refers to music from the era of the first blues recordings and the heyday of women blues performers, such as Ma Rainey.

CHAPTER 4  
COLONIZED WOMBS, CYBORG IDENTITIES AND REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY:  
MATERNAL DIALECTICS OF LILITH IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *DAWN*

She was intended to live and reproduce, not to die... Was that what she was headed for? Forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced 'donation' of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth... Humans had done these things to captive breeders – all for a higher good, of course.

-- *Dawn*

Lilith her name was. Lilith. Unusual name loaded with bad connotations. She should have changed it. Almost anything would have been better.

-- *Adulthood Rites*

In the beginning, there was Adam and Eve, and also perhaps Lilith. The original “other woman,” Lilith emerges in Jewish oral tradition and feminist interpretations of the Torah as the first true mother of humanity who is turned away from the Garden of Eden for her fierce determination not to be ruled by Adam. Described alternately as Adam’s first wife or the deceptive snake in human form that tempted Eve, Lilith’s disobedience has compelled numerous writers to explore this mythic figure in their work.<sup>1</sup> Most narratives detail Lilith’s unwavering claim that since she was made of the same dust as Adam that she was his equal, and therefore she “will not lie below” him (Ostriker 8). Her rebuff can represent an empowered figurative resistance to male supremacy, but also, if taken literally, is an assertion of preference for a particular sexual practice. Wanting to be the woman-on-top gets Lilith kicked out of Eden, and Eve is quickly sent in as a replacement.<sup>2</sup> Outside of the garden, Lilith becomes a phantom in the imaginings of Adam and Eve, and ultimately their descendants. She is described in Jewish oral traditions as a demon that threatens women in childbirth and steals babies in the night.<sup>3</sup> Other tales tell of Lilith giving birth to demons after cavorting promiscuously with them after her flight from the garden. She is said to be cursed to giving birth to 100 demons daily, each of which will

die by nightfall. Other tales describe Lilith as the source of sickness in infants (Hyman 9). In the Western literary imagination, Lilith the demon becomes symbolic of a “womanhood that would forever try to stop man from precipitating the process of personal and cosmic salvation” (Aschkenasy 51). Yet her rebelliousness and independence also becomes a touchstone for feminist mythmaking. The “uppity” and “no-nonsense” Lilith, who in some stories forms a bond with Eve, becomes symbolic of women’s solidarity against patriarchy (Plaskow 206).

Of these many literary and theological interpretations of Lilith, however, the most fascinating and relevant to my project is Lilith imagined as a black woman. Often described in the Hebrew oral tradition as dark and brooding, Lilith’s blackness is accentuated in the work of Jewish theologian, Rabbi Jill Hammer who describes her as “another Eve... this new Eve had skin like ink. Her white hair streamed down her black skin like a hundred comet tails, squiggling curving” (7-8). Poet and critic Alicia Ostriker connects the Lilith story with the lives and experiences of black women through her series, *The Lilith Poems*. In “Lilith to Eve: House, Garden,” Ostriker writes in the voice of the legendary Lilith:

*I am the woman with hair in a rainbow*

*Rag, body of iron*

*I take your laundry in, suckle your young*

*Scrub your toilets*

*Cut your sugar cane and*

*Plant and pick your cotton*

*In this place you name paradise, while you*

*Wear amulets and cast spells*

*Against me in weakness*

In this stanza, Lilith confronts Eve with her experience as the woman rejected, shunned, turned away by society. Here, Lilith's work is the work of black women: domestic service, child care, and field work. In Ostriker's work, the marginalization of Lilith mirrors the social marginalization that black women experience in the "Eden" of the United States, thus unifying her version of Lilith with the lives of real black women. Interestingly, Lilith is also imagined as a black woman in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, a series of science fiction novels that explore the fate of humanity after an apocalyptic war. After a centuries-long slumber, Lilith Iyapo awakens to find that she and other humans have been kept alive by an alien species that seeks to merge genetically with humans and repopulate the Earth. In the first novel of the trilogy, *Dawn*, Lilith is chosen to remake an Eden-like world, becoming a first mother to a new humanity.<sup>4</sup>

A few published studies have linked Butler's fascinating Lilith Iyapo character to the Jewish oral tradition. In her article, "The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction," Michele Osherow includes Butler's text in her examination of Lilith-like characters in science fiction written by women. Osherow notes that

Butler's Lilith Iyapo resembles the legendary she-devil with amazing precision. She resists tyranny, is independent, bold, and curious. Moreover, she has special powers, as Lilith is thought to have had ... Lilith Iyapo's experiences mirror those of the original Lilith to a great extent." (75)

However, Osherow limits the connection between Butler's Lilith and the Judaic figure, specifically around the site of motherhood. The fact that Butler's Lilith must birth and "mother" an entirely new kind of hybrid being on a futuristic Earth is seen as a *departure* from the traditional symbolism of Lilith. Osherow concludes that "motherhood is an unusual concentration for Lilith...[she] has never been the maternal type" (76). As long as "maternal" remains tethered solely to notions of domesticity, nurturance and purity, Osherow presents a

compelling argument; the Lilith of Jewish oral tradition rejects the domestic refuge of Eden, she is an openly sexual being and “promiscuous,” and though fertile, her powers over children are threatening because she can cause sickness and even death in children. These descriptions are far from the traditional, Western conceptions of the maternal. However, if one considers alternate visions of motherhood, particularly ones theorized by and experienced by black women, then new readings of Octavia Butler’s Lilith become available that link motherhood to qualities such as strength, power, sexuality and creativity.

Working from within a black women’s literary tradition that always already defines motherhood outside of Western frameworks of docility, nurturance and submission, Octavia Butler mobilizes the trope of mama’s gun in her Xenogenesis trilogy, particularly the novel *Dawn* (1987), by re-imagining the traditional Lilith story through the body of a black woman set in the future. In this chapter, I suggest a way of reading Lilith Iyapo that privileges Butler’s alternate visions of motherhood, which I have described previously as the trope of “mama’s gun.” What I propose through this trope is an interpretive framework that describes how black maternal figures are imagined in contemporary African American literature and popular culture. Mama’s gun takes into account black women’s polyvalent discourses surrounding motherhood and reproduction that do not privilege what Hortense Spillers calls the “ranks of gendered femaleness,” but rather allows for an assertion of subjectivity through a complicated negotiation of race, gender, sexuality and power” (278). In Chapter 1, I explored mama’s gun as an emphasis on the transformative effect of print literacy in two novels, *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*, which link motherhood and writing to empowerment in the context of the post Civil Rights political climate that denigrated black mothers who were considered hyper-reproductive, social vampires. In Chapter 2, I explored mama’s gun as blues song and performance in *Corregidora*, tracing

Ursa's use of music as an alternative site for mothering that refuses black nationalist expectations for black motherhood in the 1970s. In this chapter, I explore mama's gun as a dialectic of exploitation and empowerment facing the transgressive black maternal figure, Lilith, whose narrative of reproductive manipulation is in conversation with issues of race and reproductive technologies.

Lilith's status as the exploited human "other" to the dominant, alien Oankali forms an important foundation for my reading of this novel. For one, I am interested in how Butler's protagonist extends the rich feminist readings of Lilith stories into territories that consider the past, present and future of black women's reproductive politics. I am also interested in how Butler's story has the potential to disrupt the dominant narrative of black women's reproductive agency in the technological age. Lilith's colonized womb Black women emerge from this site of rupture in order to refocus hegemonic dialogue toward their experiences. The marginalized social roles of black women always already includes their strategic mobilization of difference, thereby situating (m)other as the consummate figure of resistance and transgression in many black women's texts. Octavia Butler's Lilith displays many characteristics similar to all of the outrageous, non-maternal aspects of the Hebrew Lilith myth precisely because Butler's text "claims the monstrosity" of transgressive black womanhood. Yet, I argue that these radical qualities cannot be separated from motherhood. So, for example, what Osherow identifies in her essay as a Western cultural anxiety about polarities such as maternal/sexual, masculine/feminine, nurturing/destructive in women's science fiction becomes legible in black women's texts through an exploration of mama's gun.

From this vantage point, I also contend that the twin concerns of motherhood and reproduction provide a unique site of inquiry into black womanhood that rejects the postmodern

impulse to disconnect subjectivity from politics. The trope of mama's gun maintains that negotiations of the self-as-mother are never far removed from their historical and political contexts, and I agree with Kevin Quashie's observation that black women are

architects of a new cultural ideology that is aware of the irresoluteness of poststructuralism ... they negotiate the crisis of self by holding firm the irreconcilables and are determined to have a 'bottom line black[female]ness,' one that is informed by but not beholden to the politics of 'post-identity and anti-essentialism.' (10)

Quashie asks that we not lose sight of the fact that even within our current "post-identity" moment within critical theory that black women's cultural production often resists a popular cynicism and skepticism around collective political identities. Rather, black women have used their works to "talk back" to, or counter, essentialist notions of their experience without abandoning a sense of the collective, material implications of their art. What's at stake, bell hooks asserts in her essay "Postmodern Blackness," is the future of liberation struggle. She argues that the abandonment of identity politics, particularly radical black subjectivity, may subvert any efforts to renew black liberation struggle or create new strategies of resistance (26). Therefore, reading black women's contemporary literature requires recognizing that identity, no matter how fluid it is imagined, remains political. Racism and white supremacy continue to overdetermine black life, thereby necessitating nothing less than a sense of self that is "informed by but not beholden to" a critical liberation ethic. Butler's compelling use of science and speculative fiction genres throughout her remarkable career speaks to her rejection of essentialist notions of what constitutes black women's literary subject matter. From within a literary enclave usually reserved for white men, Butler consistently insists upon centralizing the intersections of race and gender to our imaginative explorations of the future.

Like much of her other work, Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy continues her preoccupation with reproduction.<sup>5</sup> All three novels were published within a short span from 1987 to 1989, a

period marked by excitement and trepidation about the possibilities of medical technology for the revolutionizing of human reproduction. As middle- and upper-class white Americans began to express increasing fears about their declining fertility, new medical techniques, such as artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, were being developed and perfected to assist reproduction. *Dawn*, the novel in the trilogy that focuses most on Lilith's story, invokes the histories of reproductive experimentation and exploitation that have contributed to the recent development of reproductive technology (RT). The novel stages an enactment of tension between black women's experiences with procreative invasion and the future of RT, and invokes a dialectic that confronts two modes of thinking about RT – the emancipatory and the oppressive. For decades, feminist, medical, and legal scholars have debated about whether RT truly liberates humans, particularly women, from the condition of reduced procreative functioning, or if it is simply a series of new techniques set up to discipline and control not only women's bodies but our collective sense of kinship that continues to privilege the bourgeois nuclear family. The trilogy captures the dual concepts through its exploration of the promise and illusion of freedom through RT. On one hand, the trilogy offers a hopeful vision for the potential for reproductive alterations; that it provides for the ultimate sustainability of humanity, albeit an altered humanity. On the other hand, Lilith must be held captive and made alien to her own world in order for this change to take place. The novel *Dawn* considers the effects of power on the use of RT by both critiquing the circumstances of Lilith's forced motherhood – capture, exploitation, and incarceration – and by offering a hopeful idea of its outcome for other humans and Lilith herself.

Throughout the novel, Lilith Iyapo speaks and acts in ways that declare her a subject, departing from common depictions of black women in science fiction literature and film (when

black women appear in these texts, if at all). Held against her will by the alien Oankali species, Lilith chooses “to live and reproduce, not to die” (Dawn 58). Armed with superhuman strength, a capacity for leadership and a will to survive, Lilith creatively brokers her sense of empowerment, particularly sexual empowerment, even though her reproductive functions will be colonized and exploited by the Oankali. Butler discusses part of her motivations in writing the trilogy during an interview:

One of the things that I wanted to deal with in the *Xenogenesis* books, especially the first one, was some of the old SF myths that kind of winked out during the seventies but were really prevalent before the seventies. Myths where, for instance, people crash land on some other planet and all of a sudden they go back to ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane,’ and the women seem to accept this perfectly as all right, you know. We get given away like chattel and we get treated like . . . well, you get the picture. I thought I'd do something different (“Interview” 501-502)

Butler’s quote exemplifies her interest in considering histories of colonization and enslavement within her futuristic world. Furthermore, she consciously sets out to resist common sci-fi narratives that do not complicate women’s engagement, particularly black women’s ideas, with futuristic changes. Before exploring how *Dawn* develops the character of Lilith in opposition to these master narratives, I want to map out the historic and political implications of reproductive technologies that form the backdrop to this novel. The following section investigates the tensions surrounding reproductive technologies (RT), particularly the question of whether the promise of reproductive equality is truly possible, which will form the backdrop for Butler’s meditations on the subject that I consider later in the chapter.

### **The Promise and Illusion of Reproductive Equality**

A number of feminist and legal scholars, including Angela Davis, Dorothy Roberts, and Patricia Williams, have written about the troubled connection between RT and the history of slavery in the United States. In their critiques, they highlight how the social and ethical justification of RT relies upon an illusion of reproductive equality that has never existed.

Drawing upon their critiques, I suggest, through a brief look at RT in the United States, that the same “American grammar” that marked black women as hyper-fertile in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century continues to mark them.<sup>6</sup> Ideas about black women’s reproductive capacities continue to shape the construction of their embodied opposite: the infertile white woman. The benefactor of RT is typically imagined as a middle- or upper-class white woman, and statistically, they do avail themselves of RT more than non-white women.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the legal and financial contracts that accompany particular forms of RT, particularly surrogacy arrangements, reflect a slave-era property logic that constructed black people, especially their reproductive potential, as a commodity.

The increasing development of reproductive technologies, including artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, and cryopreservation, extend the slave-era commingling of race and reproduction in ways that affect black women’s responses to these high-tech interventions. Since the 1981 birth of the first “test tube baby,” Louise Brown, assisted reproductive technology has been used in the United States to help hundreds of thousands of women get pregnant. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is also charged with monitoring the use of fertility therapies, the most common of these treatments is in-vitro fertilization, the implantation of fertilized human eggs into a woman’s uterus. These eggs can be fertilized by the sperm of a known partner or an unknown donor, and the eggs may be implanted back into the woman’s womb or into the womb of another woman. While leaders within the field of reproductive endocrinology and infertility tout their hope for the eventual universality of access to fertility treatments, the fact is that RT is almost exclusively used by white people, particularly white women.<sup>8</sup>

As the national media decry an epidemic of infertility, conversations around who can avail themselves of these medical therapies and their motivations for pursuing those therapies reveal the interlocking complexities of race, gender, class and sexuality. There are at least four ways in which these complexities are demonstrated: through a racialized definition of infertility, through the privileging of white babies, through a historic “partializing” of black personhood, and through the unequal distribution of power in reproductive contracts. By exploring these four areas, I will show how reproductive technologies perpetuate and maintain power dynamics that have their root in slavery. Therefore, the biological promise that RT provides is discursively undercut through its tangled socio-political history. Black women, especially, have a particularly fraught relationship with RT, and I argue that Octavia Butler writes this history within her novel *Dawn*.

The ways in which infertility is defined and measured is racialized. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is a fitting example. Administered by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health, the NSFG, now in its seventh cycle of data collection since 1973, surveys a sample of the household population of the United States 15-44 years of age. Among a number of benchmarks, the NSFG measures two conditions relevant to my study: impaired fecundity, defined as “a physical difficulty with getting pregnant or carrying a baby to term” and infertility, defined as “the inability to get pregnant after one year of trying” (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm>). What is interesting about these two conditions is that their statistical measurement produces a “standard medical and demographic definition” that detours from biology alone, and rather hinges on race, class, and sexuality (<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3213200.html>). Although infertility is defined as the inability to get pregnant after one year of trying, the NSFG only measures infertility rates among

*married or cohabitating* women. In other words, a woman is not “infertile” if she is not married or cohabitating; her difficulty getting pregnant in that case is deemed “impaired fecundity,” a condition that is rarely discussed by advocates for RT. By tying infertility to marriage, this standard of measurement produces and legitimates procreation only within the confines of particular kinds of kinship arrangements, specifically marriage, an institution that white women enter at rates higher than non-white women and that lesbian women cannot enter into at all. Since the majority of married women in the United States are white, statistical details about “infertility” disproportionately privileges the reproductive lives of white women. I am interested in this definition because of the ways in which infertility is constructed as a condition and how it is privileged as a strictly medical condition requiring technological assistance.

Secondly, the concern with the reproductive capacities of white women extends to a privileging of white babies as part of the American Dream. Legal scholar Dorothy Roberts traces the value of whiteness in the use of RT in her book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*. Roberts observes that

by trading genes on the market, these technologies lay bare the high value placed on whiteness and the worthlessness accorded blackness. New reproductive technologies are popular in American culture not simply because of the value placed on the genetic tie, but because of the value placed on the white genetic tie. (269)

As the national media highlights the infertile white woman as the primary benefactor of RT, they also triumph the promise of RT through images of “perfect” white babies, whose role as a desired commodity is highlighted through their juxtaposition to “dime-a-dozen” black and Latino children. Myths about the rampant fertility of non-white women and the “overpopulation” of the developing world have fed eugenic fears of a shortage of white babies. Certainly, not every white couple consciously pursues RT for eugenic reasons, but as Laura Doyle points out “within racial patriarchy...mothers reproduce bodies not in a social vacuum but for either a

dominant or subordinate group” (4). In this framework, white women’s fertility becomes an intense site of ideological warfare. White women’s capacity to birth white children reproduces the firm boundary of racialized difference that benefits a white supremacist order. White people are interpellated into this social order through an aesthetic privileging of white babies. Therefore, beginning in the 1980s, infertile white couples flocked to RT to fulfill their dreams of nuclear family bliss.<sup>9</sup> Television talk-shows and magazine cover stories provided visual testimony to the promise that RT provided for these couples; images of cherubic white babies were everywhere.

Furthermore, Roberts cites a number of cases that demonstrate the desire for white children, including the case of a white woman who sued a fertility clinic after accidentally being inseminated with a black man’s sperm (271). The white woman’s lawsuit against the fertility clinic hinged on her receiving the “inferior product” of a black child rather than the more valuable genetically related white baby she believed she was purchasing (271). Roberts’ observations collectively point to ways in which the promise of RT is selective and eugenic, and she doubts that there would ever be “a multi-billion-dollar industry designed to create black children!” (271). The only instance that comes to mind here is the system of slave breeding that, if evaluated in today’s economic terms, would likely be a multi-billion dollar industry. Therefore, my analysis of RT is never far from questions of race and class, power and exploitation.

Thirdly, surrogacy, also known as commercialized contract motherhood (CCM) or third-party parenting, is a reproductive technology rooted in unequal power and economic relations. In this arrangement, a married couple or occasionally a single woman of substantial economic independence hires a woman to gestate a child made of genetic material from one or both parents or through donated genetic material. An embryo or embryos, fertilized *in vitro*, is implanted in

the uterus of the surrogate, the woman who carries the couple's baby to term, and once delivered, the surrogate gives the baby to the parenting couple.<sup>10</sup> Occasionally, the surrogate is a family member, but typically she is a stranger. The surrogate woman exists as both person and property, subject and object in this entanglement. The social/legal logic that makes this simultaneity possible stems from what black feminist legal scholar Patricia Williams calls a “partializing social construction,” which has its roots in slavery (10). Williams describes her idea of “partializing” in her essay “On Being the Object of Property,” in which she weaves her personal and familial history and legal theory regarding reproduction. Williams explores the legal history of slavery and refutes the idea that blacks were conceptually totalized as pure objects of their owners’ domination (8). Instead, enslaved people were seen as partialized humans. Black people could be thought of simultaneously as chattel, unworthy of all but the most basic biological sustenance, and freely willed individuals, who could be held to moral and legal codes. Williams connects the idea of “partialized social construction” to surrogacy arrangements, particularly the 1986 Baby M case, in which a surrogate mother sued to keep the child she had carried. Even though the parties involved are all white, Williams argues that the judges ruling in favor of the contracting couple could not be justified without the same kind of “partializing” logic that made slave codes operational. Williams deems the judge’s ruling a kind of “rhetorical trick,” comparing it to

the heavy-worded legalities by which my great-great-grandmother was pacified and parted from her child. In both situations, the real mother had no say, no power; her powerlessness was imposed by state law... My great-great-grandmother’s powerlessness came about as the result of a contract to which she was not a party; [the surrogate mother’s] powerlessness came about as a result of a contract that she signed at a discrete point of time yet which, over time, enslaved her. The contract-reality in both instances was no less than magic: it was illusion transformed into not-illusion. Furthermore, it masterfully disguised the brutality of enforced arrangements in which these women's autonomy, their flesh and their blood, were locked away in word vaults, without room to reconsider – *ever*. (14-15)

Important to my consideration of reproductive technologies are the ways Williams and others link the use of these technologies to the illusion of a reproductive equality that has never existed in the United States. The social construction of the surrogate and the enslaved woman as breeder commingle around this site of partialized subjectivity.

Finally, Angela Davis also makes an important link between surrogacy arrangements and historical racial and class inequalities, and a market system that allows for economic exploitation of racialized bodies. She argues that the payment for surrogacy services, which can be as much as \$20,000, ends up being less than minimum wage for the surrogate once you consider that pregnancy is a 24/7 job. This economic arrangement is exploitative, Davis argues, which always carries racial and class-based undertones because

domestic work has been primarily performed in the United States by women of color, native-born as well as recent immigrants (and immigrant women of European descent), elements of racism and class bias adhere to the concept of surrogate motherhood as potential historical features, even in the contemporary absence of large numbers of surrogate mothers of color. (215)

In other words, regardless of the actual race and class of the surrogate who enters into contractual obligation with a couple, the practice of surrogacy relies upon socially enforced inequalities of reproductive and domestic labor that emerge, at their root, from an unequal racial order.

In this section, I have addressed four ways in which reproductive technologies perpetuate and maintain reproductive inequality. The way fertility is measured by federal agencies privileges heterosexual, married couples, marking them as the only individuals to suffer from infertility. As a result of this demographic slant, the visual/popular representation of the “typically” infertile woman is white, while her “opposite” is the scary, hyper-fertile black woman, a representation originating in the system of slave breeding and perpetuated in the mythology of the welfare mother. Slavery also created the legal and economic backdrop for

contemporary surrogacy arrangements, building upon the already unstable foundation of racial, class, and gender inequality. All of these factors have rendered the “promise” of RT problematic for scores of black women, who either are economically unable to avail themselves of fertility therapies, or who reject RT for ideological reasons. The net historic result of these influential representations of fertility has rendered the notion of reproductive equality a highly contested terrain, so much so that skepticism and distrust for reproductive technologies has become a critical aspect of black women’s collective reproductive politics<sup>11</sup>. In ways that are similar to my discussion in Chapter 1 of black women’s desire to bear and raise their own children as a facet of their reproductive politics, I am suggesting that black women’s interaction with RT similarly has socio-historical, political origins. Octavia Butler’s novel *Dawn* intimately engages with these politics through the character Lilith, who negotiates a strategy of survival and selfhood in spite of her situation as an exploited “other.”

### **The Dialectics of Lilith in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn***

In this section, I will examine how Butler’s novel *Dawn* stages a dialectic relationship between the oppressive and emancipatory possibilities of reproductive technology. A dialectic relationship between the categories of “woman” and “technology” has been already been identified by feminist scholars as a cornerstone of feminist science fiction, which Butler further complicates through her inclusion of black women as protagonists in her novels and short stories. In the novel *Dawn*, specifically, Butler foregrounds the exploitative histories of race and reproduction, yet offers a radically alternative vision for their future that privileges the subjectivity of the black female protagonist. Lilith is used as a biological resource for the advancement of the Oankali, who travel the universe to reproduce with other species in search of genetic perfection. Though the nomadic Oankali refer to the process as a “trade,” Lilith and the

other humans who have been saved from nuclear devastation on Earth see the arrangement as exploitative and dangerous. Yet, as the story advances, Lilith begins to see her situation less as enslavement and more as an opportunity for new kinds of sexual experience and kinship bonds. Significantly, she begins to understand the Oankali's three-gendered reproductive process, through which she revises her ideas about gender, sexuality, and motherhood in ways that she ultimately finds more promising and liberating than her experiences on Earth. Her choices, however, make her monstrous to her fellow humans, and she must decide how to cope with becoming like the Lilith of ancient Hebrew lore: feared, misunderstood, and outcast. How Butler develops Lilith's subjectivity and her shifting perceptions of experience forms the basis for this section. Through a close-reading of the text, I will identify narrative moments that illustrate how Butler develops a "dialectics of Lilith." Butler produces a dialectic effect through her intertextual use of slave narratives to describe Lilith's captivity; her exploration of linguistics that highlights tensions over the meaning of "mother;" her description of human-alien sex that redefines possibilities for desire; and her development of Lilith's superhuman strength, which establishes her ability to both create and destroy. Taken together, these narrative focal points provide a glimpse into Butler's incorporation of reproductive politics within her novel, and her participation in a black women's literary tradition that typically seeks to define the symbol of "mother" outside of dominant ideologies.

### **Enslavement as Alien Abduction Narrative**

Lilith's confining and disorienting imprisonment at the beginning of *Dawn* parallels the African experience during the Middle Passage, which bears striking parallels to a number of other narratives within the genres of science fiction and speculative fiction. For four centuries, millions of captured Africans were snatched from their homes and forced to travel long, disorienting distances from the interior to the coast of the continent. They were then loaded onto

unfamiliar vessels by which they traveled at sea for an unknowable amount of time. Upon their arrival to the alien landscape of the “New World,” captives were forced to undergo strange experiments that sought to illuminate their difference from their captors, and then they were put to work as subordinates. A number of early slave narratives describe an alien-like encounter with “white faced people” (Carretta 149). For example, an enslaved African woman named Belinda petitioned the legislature of Massachusetts for her freedom, and in the document she describes her capture as “scenes which her imagination had never conceived of, a floating world, [in] the sporting monsters of the deep” (Carretta 142). Though the definitions of “science fiction literature” are wide-ranging and hotly debated, there is, within, Belinda’s description, the quality of the “fantastic,” which seems common within the sci-fi genre. Science fiction writer and lecturer Adam Roberts defines the genre as “a literature of ideas predicated on some substantive *difference or differences* between the world described and the world in which readers actually live” (3, emphasis added). This sense of difference, experienced by the reader but evoked by *the writer*, is demonstrated in numerous narratives of alien abduction, including *Dawn*, and bears significant resemblance to descriptions of African-European encounters at the dawn of Western modernity.<sup>12</sup>

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oluadah Equiano*, published in 1794, gives one of the most detailed accounts of trans-Atlantic abduction, describing the horror and confusion that Equiano endures through his journey. Unfortunately, there are not many female authored slave narratives that depict women’s experiences of their initial capture; Belinda’s story was one of the few that I found. As a result, I rely on Equiano’s story in this comparative reading because his story bears striking resemblance to the opening pages of *Dawn*, and I wish to link Lilith’s sense of captivity and torture to recorded historic details of these kinds of encounters.<sup>13</sup>

In his narrative, Equiano describes the “near suffocation” he experienced under the deck of the ship and the animal-like conditions in the hold of the vessel, where the captured Africans were kept in chains. Equiano also writes that seeing the ship that would transport him into the unknown “filled me with astonishment, that soon converted into terror,” which overcame him to the point of fainting (qtd. in Gates 57). When “he recovered a little,” Equiano began to gather more details about his European captors. In the opening pages of *Dawn*, Lilith Iyapo awakes to the “nightmare sensations of asphyxiation” in a dimly lit room that is both familiar and strange to her senses (3). Disoriented and claustrophobic, she realizes that she has been repeatedly waking up in this room or a similar room for an unknown period of time. At this point, the narrative reveals little information about Lilith’s surroundings but it does reveal her frightened sense of captivity. Lilith knows that she is being “kept,” but has no idea why. She recognizes the items she has been “given” – a toilet, lumpy stew, a pile of clothing – though she has no idea who or what has control over her basic survival needs. Her confining room seems foreign and paranormal. Stains on the walls and floor vanish as if by magic. There is no identifiable light source, no obvious ventilation: “She imagined herself to be in a large box, like a rat in a cage” (5). The similar experiences of “terror” (Equiano) and “nightmare” (Lilith) and the act of passing out from disorientation link these two narratives from the start. While held captive both remark upon their closeness to animals; Equiano mentions the way the Europeans saw Africans as “brutes,” while Lilith remarks upon being like a “rat in a cage.” Upon regaining consciousness, Equiano and Lilith attempt to investigate their surroundings and the nature of their captors, which reveals a heightened sense of wonder.

Equiano writes that he believed “I had got into a world of bad spirits...Their complexions too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language that they spoke...united to

confirm me in this belief” that he was “to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair” (57). Lilith experiences a similar fear when she first sees the humanoid Oankali. Above all else, she notices its difference in skin color and hair. She has brown skin (8), while the Oankali is covered in pale gray skin and darker gray hair that grows around its eyes, ears and throat (11). As she looks closer at the being, Lilith realizes that the hair is actually a group of snake-like, moving sensory organs that the Oankali uses to perceive its environment. “She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall. When she could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at him. Medusa” (12). Frightened and disbelieving, Lilith fears that the strange-looking being may harm her or kill her. She backs away in disgust and fear.

Finally, both narratives describe acts of resistance toward captivity. Equiano writes about groups of Africans who would jump from the deck of the ship in order to drown themselves. In some cases these jumps were “successful;” captives could escape their torture and confinement through death. The slavers, however, did what they could to prevent this kind of resistance. When they could, Equiano writes, the slavers would go out to sea in smaller boats to bring back those who had jumped. Equiano describes the kind of brutal retribution exacted upon survivors: “Two of the wretches were drowned; but they got the other, and afterward flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery” (61). Similarly, Lilith mounts her own attempt at resistance prior to her first viewing of the Oankali. For an unknown amount of time, she is spoken to by her captors, though she is unable to see them. They ask her a series of questions, and she determines that they wish to gather information from her. In an effort to bargain with and resist her unseen wardens, Lilith stops answering their questions. This tactic does not work. Her captors simply stop speaking to her, initiating a kind of mental torture that sends her into a state of emotional exhaustion: “she sat on the floor rocking, thinking about

losing her mind” (8). Lilith’s attempt at resistance is thwarted by the Oankali in a way that heightens her sense of isolation and psychological torture. Though Lilith’s thwarted resistance is not the same as the beating of suicidal captives, I do see parallels in the kind of psychological terrorism both stories depict.

Equiano’s text offers a glimpse into the real-life alien encounter that millions of Africans endured as captives. His stunning narrative provides a sense of the awe and terror, fascination and wonder that accompanied this moment of encounter. Equiano’s language of unconsciousness and awakening, of animal-like confinement and fear, and thwarted resistance and psychological turmoil bears more than a passing resemblance to Lilith’s experience. “Kept helpless, alone and ignorant,” Lilith’s encounter can be read as a reflection of the histories of enslaved people (3). In a way, then, *Dawn* acts as a neo-slave narrative, joining a number of texts within the African-American literary tradition that revisit the physical and spiritual devastation of enslavement.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, *Dawn* provides an imaginative opportunity to extend the slave narrative tradition by reorienting the largely male voices of prominent enslaved writers (Equiano, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass, for example) toward the concerns of black women, specifically their reproductive exploitation. By shifting Lilith’s locus of concern from her general captivity, which parallels Equiano’s story, toward her selection as a breeder for a new alien-human hybrid, Butler further complicates the gendered intertextual implications of her work.

### **Reproduction within the Neo-slave Narrative Tradition**

*Dawn* opens with a section entitled “Womb,” which establishes the novel’s related themes of reproduction and confinement. Lilith first gets a hint that she may have been reproductively altered after she awakens from one of her lapses of consciousness, and she discovers a scar across her abdomen. Bewildered, she thinks “she did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge” (5). Though she

discovers that the Oankali had only removed a cancerous tumor from her, she continually feels a sense of foreboding about the Oankali's interest in her body. When she asks her Oankali guide, Jdahya, what the Oankali intend to do with her and the other humans, he does not respond. Lilith feels helpless not knowing what will become of her interaction with the aliens, again equating her situation with that of an experimental animal: "This is one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good. 'We used to treat animals that way,' she muttered bitterly" (31). Lilith grapples with being kept like "a rat in a cage," used for scientific exploration and experimentation. She eventually discovers the reason for Jdahya's silences when she asks about the purposes of the research: the Oankali intend to use human genes to renew their species. Jdahya explains: "We do what you would call genetic engineering... We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species" (39). What the Oankali call a genetic "trade," Lilith calls "inbreeding" and "crossbreeding," pointing to a conflict in language that exposes the unequal power dynamic between the Oankali and the humans (39). The word "trade" evokes a sense of egalitarian exchange, while "inbreeding" and "crossbreeding" are suggestive of exploitation and manipulation. Lilith eventually comes to understand her purpose as a captive of the Oankali:

She was intended to live and reproduce, not to die. Experimental animal, parent to domestic animals? Or...nearly extinct animal, part of a captive breeding program? Human biologists had done that before the war...Forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced 'donation' of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth...Humans had done these things to captive breeders – all for a higher good, of course." (58)

Lilith's analysis of her situation with the Oankali likens her situation to ones that she recalls from her life on Earth. She compares the Oankali reproductive system with the normalized breeding practices that humans used on experimental animals, domestic animals and other humans. Her recollection of human reproductive experiments is punctuated by ellipses and

pauses. These stops and starts give a sense of disorientation, as her mind races to make sense of the Oankali's plans. She realizes that the reproductive practices of the Oankali, which she finds repulsive, are similar to normalized medical practices that she took for granted on Earth.

Despite the normalization of those practices, Lilith's thoughts depict an inherent skepticism surrounding reproductive technology, as it has been used on Earth. Butler uses the oxymoron of "forced donation" to show that Lilith already had doubts about the power dynamics involved in emerging reproductive technologies that existed while she still lived on Earth. Her thoughts suggest that women who "donate" their eggs for in vitro fertilization may in fact be forced into these arrangements, perhaps through the economic coercion of a \$20,000 check. Her final thought that "humans had done these things to captive breeders – all for a higher good, of course" further develops a sense of skepticism. The fact that Butler uses the loaded term "captive breeders" to refer to the women who have undergone the aforementioned list of reproductive manipulations speaks again to the unequal power relations inherent in these techniques. Women who enter into surrogacy contracts, donate their eggs or undergo forms of experimentation may not be literally captive, yet Butler refuses to decouple the use and development of RT from its ideological roots in enslavement and indentureship. Keeping this in mind then Lilith's final remark, "for a higher good, of course," is sarcastic. After critiquing the uses of RT in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Butler reminds us that certain bodily invasions were once touted as positive breakthroughs in human reproduction. The phrase "higher good" speaks to the promise of RT that is meant to hide its problematic realities.

Understandably, Lilith distrusts and fears the plans of the Oankali, and craves other human contact because "only a human could reassure her – or at least understand her fear" (59). She is denied other human contact, at least initially, so she begins to bond with an Oankali child

named Nikanj. Nikanj is *ooloi*, a third, neutral gender in Oankali life that is meant to create balance between male-female kinship units. The powerful *ooloi* are also integral to Oankali sex. At full sexual maturity, they possess an extra set of “arms.” At the tip of each arm, a hand-like structure emerges that forms a bridge of stimulation in Oankali sexual encounters. Lilith is introduced to Nikanj before it reaches puberty, before its sensory arms have developed. Nikanj is entrusted to teach Lilith the Oankali language and customs. Yet unlike the other Oankali who approach Lilith in a sterile, calculated way, Nikanj truly bonds with Lilith. They share food and living quarters. They trust each other enough to ask questions and have conversations. Lilith begins to act as a mother-guardian to Nikanj, and “only Nikanj gave her any pleasure, any forgetfulness. The *ooloi* child seemed to have been given to her as much as she had been given to it. It rarely left her, seemed to like her” (58). Lilith’s connection to Nikanj deepens as it enters puberty, and it requests her comforting presence during its metamorphosis. In return, Nikanj facilitates Lilith’s first sense of freedom on the Oankali ship; it allows her to roam parts of the ship unsupervised. Nikanj offers to alter Lilith’s brain chemistry in order to allow her to learn the Oankali language more quickly and develop the ability to open and close walls with the touch of her hand.

She accepts the *ooloi* offer, and through her increased freedom and mobility and her maternal connection with Nikanj she begins to re-evaluate her role in the Oankali “trade.” At the outset, she remains skeptical about her new powers and freedom, remarking: “so she could walk the corridors and walk among the trees, but she couldn’t get into anything Nikanj didn’t want her in” (101). Again, Lilith remarks upon her conditions through a sarcastic comment that highlights how her freedom is conditional and limited by the wishes of the Oankali. Lilith uses sarcasm throughout the novel as a resistant speech act that juxtaposes her external and internal realities.

Given freedom, yet still feeling like a “pet animal,” Lilith struggles with her bitterness and gratitude toward her captors. Angrily, she abandons Nikanj as it begins a difficult part of its transformation, the growth of its sensory arms (100-101). Lilith watches Nikanj as it trembles on a bed in their shared quarters, and “she neither knew or cared what was wrong with it” (101). However, just as she walks out of the room to eat her first meal in freedom, she is compelled to return to the suffering Nikanj. She feeds it fruit and asks about how the transformation feels. She eventually lies down next to Nikanj, giving it comfort through its transition.

She sighed, tried to understand her own feelings. She was still angry – angry, bitter, frightened... And yet she had come back. She had not been able to leave Nikanj trembling in its bed while she enjoyed her greater freedom. (102)

At this point, Butler’s narrative provides complicated insights into Lilith’s navigation of her multiple roles as reproductive host and “mother” to Nikanj. On the one hand, she is compelled through a sense of nurturing, love and care to provide attention to Nikanj. Yet, Lilith’s nurturing is expressed as concomitant with the un-maternal feelings of anger, bitterness, and fear. Though these are typically seen as “negative” emotions, Lilith’s anger, bitterness and fear fuel her resistance to the Oankali. Her greatest gains – the freedom to move about the ship and the gift of writing implements – were secured after she harnessed her anger, bitterness, and fear into a more empowered position. I am not trying to suggest that anger, bitterness, and fear alone make Lilith an empowered character in this novel. But I do want to suggest that Butler evokes a dialectic framework for the understanding of Lilith that relies upon the duality of anger/nurturing, fear/care.

### **New Gender Paradigm**

Remarkably, Lilith overcomes her fear of the Oankali enough to become intimately attached to Nikanj. Her consistent resistance to Oankali domination and her acceptance of Oankali interaction demonstrates the strength of her character, a trait that surprises the Oankali

who have been studying human interaction for centuries. An older ooloi named Kahguyaht expresses its surprise that Lilith would be able to lead the Oankali/human interaction. Kahguyaht did not initially believe that Lilith, or any human female for that matter, would be capable of the task of balancing the skills that would be necessary to work as a leader. Kahguyaht states: “I believed that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group. I think now that I was wrong” (110). The reference to the way “human genetics were expressed in culture” implicates an important aspect of how gender acts in human affairs. Males, because of their perceived biological difference from females, are positioned in many human societies as superior in strength and intelligence. Perhaps Kahguyaht, after observing and studying human societies, believed that males possess superior qualities, and that leader of the Oankali/human trade should be man’s work. Yet, the ooloi is surprised that the kind of strength and intelligence needed to re-create the new Earth would come from a human woman, Lilith.

Further complicating Kahguyaht’s statement is Lilith’s reaction to its choice of the word “parent.” She is puzzled by the word. “Parent?” she asks. Kahguyaht replies:

That’s the way we think of it. To teach, to give comfort to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world. To parent. (110)

Lilith, still unable to reconcile the gender-neutral term “parent” with the qualities that her captor has described, says “You’re going to set me up as their *mother*?” (110) At this point in the narrative Lilith must confront her gender identifications that attach nurturing behavior to women. What Butler is able to do in this narrative is detail Lilith’s transformation, especially in terms of her relationship to gender roles, through her connection with the Oankali. It is in the second half of the novel, when she begins to accept her role as “parent” to the Oankali/human hybrids that she transcends the kind of rigid gender designations that are exemplified in the earlier passage.

Lilith, at this point, remains unable to conceive of her work creating a new civilization as anything but mothering. But as the novel progresses, her work extends beyond clothing, guiding, nurturing and support, idealized images of “mothering” that have already been shown to be problematic. She begins to embody the idea of mama’s gun, as a transformational, transgressive identity that constitutes traditionally conceived masculine and feminine roles, desires and actions. The novel seems to offer Lilith’s transformed self, her use of mama’s gun as resistance to the Oankali reproductive imperative. Though she is unable to free herself completely from the grasp, she manages as kind of self-preservation and an assertion of her subjectivity in the course of her participation in the awakening of humanity to their new existence as reproductive trade partners with the Oankali.

### **Cyborg Possibility**

Patricia Melzer and Donna Haraway point to the significance of Butler’s work within the body of feminist science fiction written since the 1970s for her insistence upon black women as central to her narratives. Melzer, in her book *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*, identifies common features of feminist science fiction, exemplified by the writings of Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr., as work that typically addresses the fraught relationships between the gendered body and technology. Working from Donna Haraway’s framework of cyborg feminism, Melzer also concludes that feminist science fiction provides women writers the opportunity to critique the power structures of patriarchal technoscience, particularly around the site of the body. Working with a variety of narrative possibilities, feminist science fiction tends to suggest a way out of the schema of domination that typically describes the encounter between “woman” and “technology.” Donna Haraway identifies this opportunity for critique as the “imaginative resource” of the cyborg:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation. (397)

For Haraway, the metaphor of cyborg offers a bridge between social reality and fiction that disrupts the boundary between organism and machine. The phrase, “in *our* time,” suggests a sense of collectivity, which she identifies later in the essay as anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-domination social progressives. By embracing this metaphor, she suggests a kind of duality of existence that offers a resistance to domination in the real. The imagined possibility of merging of human and machine destroys the epistemology of binary perceptions and allows one “to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point” (401).

Black women are cyborgs, and have been since their encounter with the West. As Hortense Spillers makes note that the legal descriptions of “slave” almost always listed the term as equivalent to animals as well as tools, culinary items and other property (226). That “imposed uniformity” of both the live and inanimate forms the basis of a reading of black women as always already within the imaginative framework of Haraway’s cyborg feminism. While Butler’s work certainly shares the themes and concerns of other pieces of feminist science fiction, her work provides the important missing link to other women’s science fiction through her concerns with implications of race. Melzer writes that the novels in Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy “are in dialogue with feminist theories about subjectivities of women of color that view identity as a continuous negotiation of conflicting experiences more than a final product” (18). *Mama’s gun* also can be a framework that revises cyborg feminism with further attention toward the ways in which race complicates the metaphor.

## Conclusion

The observations of Haraway and Melzer, notwithstanding, I connect Butler's dialectics, her conception of the "cyborg" is reflective of the writer's entrenchment within a black women's literary tradition that always already conceives of itself as transgressive and dangerous. By drawing parallels between Lilith's post-apocalyptic capture by the alien Oankali and the capture and enslavement of Africans during the Middle Passage, Butler fuses her futuristic narrative with the historic implications of race, reproduction, and exploitation. After drawing these significant parallels, however, Butler frees Lilith to explore the possibility of liberation and empowerment in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Lilith's depiction in the Hebrew literary tradition, see Chapter Two in Nehama Aschkenasy, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1986) and Avraham Balaban, *Between God and Beast: An Examination of Amos Oz's Prose* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). Conversations with Dr. Balaban helped steer me toward the rich literary meaning Lilith holds within the Hebrew literary tradition, which has influenced my readings of Lilith in a black woman's text.

<sup>2</sup> Exploring the variety of interpretations of the Lilith story has also uncovered fascinating alternate readings of the role and symbolism of Eve in the Genesis story. I am particularly drawn to the reading of Eve exemplified in Marge Piercy's poem "Applesauce for Eve," in which she writes "you are indeed the mother of invention, the first scientist" (10). Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit takes on different meaning if thought of as deliberate exploration and experimentation, qualities valorized among men, rather than taken as foolishness and treachery that dooms humanity.

<sup>3</sup> While the Torah only mentions Lilith directly once, in Isaiah 34:14, she appears through the Jewish tradition of Midrash, an oral tradition of close reading and interpretation of the holy text. Midrash is built on the assumption that everything in the Torah is a clue to deeper understanding of its meaning; it is a "means of extracting meaning from the Bible, but also a way of reading meaning into the text." (Biblical Women in the Midrash xxix) The Lilith story appears in the medieval text *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, which also describes Lilith as Adam's first wife.

<sup>4</sup> There are other popular, futuristic images of black women as the last hope for humanity, including the characters Dr. Kaela Evers in the film *Supernova* (2000), Selena in the film *28 Days Later* (2002), and Kee in the film *Children of Men* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> In an essay on Butler, Elyce Rae Helford cites Butler's recurring interest in themes of reproduction: "From the Medusa-like appearance of the alien Oankali in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy and the archetypal power of the matriarchal shape shifter Anyanwu in her 1980 novel *Wild Seed* to Gads "female" reproductive function for the Tlic in "Bloodchild," Butler is deeply invested in science-fictional metaphors for the "feminine" which challenge traditional representations."

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<sup>6</sup> I am using Hortense Spillers' term "American grammar" here to refer to the symbolic order that "remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history...show movement" (208). Spillers' term explains how meaning is inscribed and ascribed to certain bodies, and how these meanings persist over time.

<sup>7</sup> Of the estimated 6.7 million women identified with current fertility problems in a 1995 survey, only 8.3 percent of black women used artificial insemination compared to the 16.5 percent of white women. The racial disparity is starker as treatments become more specialized; only 0.6 percent of black women used a spectrum of assisted reproductive technologies, while 6.4 percent of white women used the same therapies. According to the CDC, assisted reproductive technologies involve "all fertility treatments in which both eggs and sperm are handled. In general, ART procedures involve surgically removing eggs from a woman's ovaries, combining them with sperm in the laboratory, and returning them to the woman's body or donating them to another woman. "Stephen, Elizabeth Hervey and Anjani Chandra. "Use of Infertility Services in the United States: 1995" *Family Planning Perspectives* 32.3 (May/June 2000) <<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3213200.html> <http://www.cdc.gov/art/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Wallace C. Nunley of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, NC, touted the legacy of successes in the field of RT in a speech given to the South Atlantic Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. As he addressed the group he lamented the lack of insurance coverage for infertile couples who wish to use available therapies. He opines that "In a utopian world, there would be universal coverage for those persons who are affected by infertility. But, if treatment is provided to a 35-year-old couple, should equal coverage be provided to a 45-year-old couple?" His statement highlights the ways in which access and use of RT is flattened out and equalized in popular and even medical discourses, so much so that the issue of inequality of access comes down to age rather than issues of race, class, and sexuality. See "The Slippery Slopes of Advanced Reproductive Technologies: Presidential Address" *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 191.2 (August 2004), 588-592. Transactions of the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile images of racially mixed families are typically seen as preposterous in the popular culture. The television sit-com *Diff'rent Strokes*, which aired on NBC from 1978 to 1985, highlighted the comedic troubles of a non-normative family that consisted of a white widower, his genetically related white daughter, and two orphaned black boys who he adopts. Though the program highlighted the love and affection this non-traditional family shared, it was always demonstrated within the context of intense racial difference. The ways in which the Drummonds negotiated their differences was almost always portrayed as slapstick comedy, which contrasted other popular, sentimental images of white family bliss. Also important to this imagined mixed-race family is the absence of the white mother, who typically symbolizes the mediator of racial purity in the domestic space.

<sup>10</sup> There are two types of surrogacy known as gestational surrogacy and traditional surrogacy. In traditional surrogacy, the surrogate is inseminated with the sperm of the father via intrauterine insemination. The resultant baby will have the genetic structure of the father and the surrogate. The second type of surrogacy is known as gestational surrogacy, which is where the surrogate carries the embryo, created in vitro and produced by the infertile couple. The infant will have the genetic makeup of the infertile couple. In gestational surgery, the mother undergoes an in vitro fertilization cycle where she receives medication to stimulate her ovaries to produce multiple eggs. If the mother does not have viable eggs, an egg donor may be used. The eggs are withdrawn through the vagina and combined with the male partner's sperm in a Petri dish. The dish is then placed in an incubator until ready for transfer, usually 3-5 days. The gestational surrogate receives hormones to synchronize her cycle with the mother's. The mature embryos are transferred to the surrogate mother using a small catheter.

<sup>11</sup> For more on African-American's distrust of medical institutions see Harriet Washington's *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> My departure from Roberts' concern for the reader to an emphasis on "the writer" is an effort to call to mind the subject position of the writers of slave narratives and their grappling with their modernity.

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<sup>13</sup> I am using the Gates collection of slave narratives and will refer only to page numbers in subsequent references.

<sup>14</sup> Notable works written by black women that exhibit the neo-slave narrative impulse include *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and xxx. For more on neo-slave narratives, see “Witnessing Slavery after Freedom,” (Chapter 8) Deborah McDowell, *The Changing Same Black Women’s Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) ; *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women’s Fiction*, Venetria K. Patton. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000) particularly Chapter Five; and *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*, Angelyn Mitchell (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002).

CHAPTER 5  
BIG MAMA, MADEA, AND SUPERMODEL: QUEER PERFORMANCE OF THE BLACK  
MATERNAL FIGURE IN THE WORK OF TYLER PERRY AND RUPAUL

‘Mudear. That’s what I called my mother and that’s what I want my children to call me. It’s short for ‘Mother dear.’ No, baby, don’t say ‘Maa-maa,’ say ‘Mu-dear,’ ‘Mu-dear,’ she would instruct each of the girls from age one on until each said it with just the same lilting inflections on the *dear* that the originator used.

Tina McElroy Ansa, *Ugly Ways*

I remember a guy on the corner of my neighborhood who wanted to be a Madea. He would come out of his house every morning with the curlers in his hair and a bandanna and just look around and see what the kids were doing. He would then run and tell their parents. But he was kind of illegitimate.

Tyler Perry, *Don’t Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings*

For the past decade, the African-American cross-dressing phenomenon that goes by the name of Madea has steadily amassed growing audiences in black communities across the United States, becoming noteworthy in mainstream media outlets not only for the numbers of black people who go to see “her” plays and movies, but also for the concentrated spending power that Hollywood has “discovered” within black communities.<sup>1</sup> For a time, the spectacle of a 6-foot-5-inch tall black man shabbily dressed in wig, makeup, false breasts, dress and pumps packed major urban theatre venues and, in the case of Madea’s most recent film *Madea’s Goes To Jail* (2009), charted multi-million dollar box-office revenues. The fame and financial success of Tyler Perry, the man behind Madea, has been attributed to the “authenticity” of his performance of the sassy, gun-toting, marijuana-smoking grandmother Mabel “Madea” Simmons, who Perry tells interviewers is an amalgam of traits resembling his actual mother and aunt (P. Johnson, par. 10).

Male performances that portray black mothers and grandmothers have antecedents in other post Civil Rights black cultural products – Martin Lawrence has made two movies as “Big Momma” and Eddie Murphy has cross-dressed as Sherman Klump’s mother and grandmother in *The Nutty Professor* films – and Tyler Perry’s version stands out for its appeal to audiences who,

for the most part, seem to disassociate Perry's performance from drag culture or queer aesthetics, even though Perry is at his most recognizable when cross-dressed as Madea.<sup>2</sup> Unlike actor/comedians Lawrence and Murphy, who have other staple characters that they portray in a variety of movies and who have long careers as stand-up comedians and performers, Perry carved a substantial place in black popular culture solely through the commodification of his cross-dressed body in the loose guise of a loud, but nurturing black mother. Perry's popularity as Madea reached its zenith when he authored a self-help book of advice for black women, *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings: Madea's Uninhibited Commentaries on Love and Life* (2006). On one level, the book simply rearticulates the humorous, homespun, "honey-chile" aphorisms that have become a staple of the stage plays. On another level, however, the text uncannily acts as a memoir, revealing aspects of Perry's life through Madea's persona.

The book has a foreword written by Perry, as himself, while the introduction and rest of the book is "authored" by Madea, who writes to black women about sex, men, weight gain, and church, but also pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation. Perry goes to great lengths to separate the personas. He goes so far as to allow Madea to share her thoughts on Perry, who Madea says she met when he "was a little boy:"

I knew his mother and his auntie. They were all worried about him because he talked to himself. He walked around a lot by himself and spent a lot of time alone. We were really worried one day. We saw him with a pink dress on. He said it was because it was Mardi Gras, but I don't know. We were all very concerned. (xvi)

The full intention of the passage is unclear. Whether it is true or a bit of humor is not revealed; the episode is not mentioned again in the book and I have not been able to find reference to it in any interviews of Perry. Regardless, the quote provides an interesting lens through which to view Perry's performance as Madea. What would it mean if Perry really did like to wear dresses as a child? What if wearing a dress was not just about his profession as an actor/comedian, but

somehow expressed other kinds of desire? Is this possibility of non-normative desire what his mother and auntie worried about?

What has been fascinating about Perry's ascendancy in black popular culture is how he manages to deflect, for the most part, questions about his sexuality being anything other than straight and his gender identity as anything other than traditionally masculine.<sup>3</sup> Perry seems to dodge the kind of questions not typically forestalled in the cases of other black men who publically cross-dress or perform in drag, such as Murphy, Dennis Rodman or RuPaul.<sup>4</sup> How does Perry-as-Madea resist interpellation into the margins of black masculinity, marked as "illegitimate"? In the epigraph, taken from Perry's book, *Don't Make a Black Woman*, he recalls a man in the community he grew up in who took on the role of a Madea. Madea – also spelled Mudear, M'Dear and Ma'Dear – is simply an abbreviated pronunciation of "Mother" and "Dear," but it has come to name any kind of Big Mama in the black community. Perry explains "she was the head of that village," a loving, caring woman who looked after children, but was "not politically correct. She doesn't care about anything but what is honest and true. And she is always saying the least expected things" (x).<sup>5</sup> Perry acknowledges that many people wanted to be Madea and that the world would be a better place if there were more real Madeas. Yet when the man from the epigraph "with curlers in his hair" acted as a Madea, Perry dismisses him as illegitimate, inauthentic. The neighbor remains static and voiceless in this passage, unable to articulate the source of his Madea impersonation and what it might mean to him to affect the persona of a complicated but confident black mother.

In many ways, Perry's Madea demonstrates aspects of mama's gun described throughout my project. As a post-Civil Rights era black maternal figure, Madea and other Big Mamas trouble the binaries between masculine/feminine, good mothers/bad mother, respectable/low-

class. Madea has a strong voice, which she uses for self-definition and resistance. Furthermore, Madea is a sexual mother figure, who talks freely about work as a stripper, her multiple husbands and boyfriends, and other sexual conquests. These elements of mama's gun exist in Madea, but does mama's gun operate here within this symbolic order in a way that supports black women as self-defining autonomous agents? Does mama's gun change when it is wielded by a man? To that end, in this chapter, I explore the work of Perry and drag performer RuPaul, who have developed in their work a creative alter-ego that manifests aspects of "mama's gun." They each call their personas by different names – Madea and Supermodel – which I will describe in detail later in this chapter. Ultimately, I contend that these figures share similar symbolic resources for their work, and I classify these figures as (queer) performances of the black mother. In order to outline the contours of my argument, I will first establish why I read these performances as queer, particularly Perry's work, when he seems to resist this label the most. I will then map out the performative elements of black mother figures by tracing the historical referents of The Mammy and The Matriarch, whose synthesis forms the foundation for the contemporary image of the Big Mama.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in the last section, I explore how Tyler Perry and RuPaul incorporate and resist the performative nature of this figure, leading to an uneven use of mama's gun.

### **Transgressive Possibility in Queer Performances of the Black Mother**

If mama's gun is the demonstration of the transgressive potential of particular marginalized representations of black mothers in contemporary literature and popular culture, then what could be more destabilizing than men adopting the personas of these mothers? Certainly, their performances of their female role models could be indicative of a tacit or explicit acknowledgement of the power of embracing the subjectivity of the "other," a critically necessary step for disempowering several modes of dominance.<sup>7</sup> Each man discussed in this chapter has acknowledged explicitly in his writings that his adoption of a female persona comes

from his conscious desire to perform versions of his own mother as well as other black mothers in their communities. From this vantage point, I have identified their work as queer in the sense that their use of drag and camp aesthetics problematizes the traditional economies of gender and, in some cases, heterosexuality. The fact that these performances have the opportunity to theorize difference as a progressive discursive location for cultural practice is what marks them as queer. This category does not assume any of the men here would claim queer as an identity, but my figuration envisions “queer” as an adjective to describe a kind of performance, rather than nominatively.

Queer cultural work may not unilaterally manifest as resistance to multiple, intersecting modes of dominance and exploitation. Queer scholars and activists of color have warned against this assumption, noting that within the corpus of queer scholarship there exists a tendency to overlook or ghettoize the significance of racial difference within progressive discussions of sexual liberty. This silencing of racial critique often emanates from those who refuse to acknowledge their privileges (being white, being male, or being middle- and upper-class). Without transparent, honest critiques of power, especially pockets of power possessed by the sexually marginalized, the transgressive potential of queer cultural work remains unrealized. Likewise, in the case of the work under review in this chapter, I suggest that black men’s performances of black maternal figures only tap into the potential for destabilization of gender norms when the male performers acknowledge and work to destabilize their male privilege.

I find Ann DuCille’s discussion of power and perspective in the essay “Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical ‘I’” instructive in thinking through the entanglements of queer transformative politics in this project. Though she is not undertaking a critique of queer cultural work, she does offer reflect on the effect of patriarchal perspectives on

black women's fiction. DuCille importantly questions the "authority of the critical *I* to constitute the *Other* it beholds, even in the midst of reading the *Other*'s celebration of its own subjectivity" (445). If the male drag performer is the "critical I" and the black mother is the "Other," what kind of authorial power does the male drag performer bring into his performance of the black mother? DuCille concludes that the imperative toward racial patriarchy often undergirds black men's analyses of black women's texts, leading to a misreading of their work and their representations. She later asks, rhetorically: "Is it possible for the male I to read the female text it others without reinscribing hierarchies of one kind or another, without in effect deauthoring and even deracializing the female beheld?" (445). I think the same question can be asked in the case of male drag performance of black maternal figures. The kind of strong black mothers that black men often portray are often regarded as positive reflections on the endurance of black women against a number of social pressures. However, this moment of celebration and reverence for black women's autonomy can easily slip into the service of hierarchies of gender and sexuality. These performers never have to give up their male privilege; they can use the figure of the black mother as a disguise for their male bodies and phallic power.<sup>8</sup>

When engaging the black mother subject, many of these actors and comedians problematically turn to a positive attraction to "strength" and its appeal to cultural authenticity without considering the other ways black women react to and resist domination, nor black women's complicated strategies for developing selfhood and subjectivity under these constraints. This observation is part of the larger point I wish to make here, particularly around issues of critical transformation, which I think gets at the heart of why this conversation is important and illuminates my interest in this subject. A number of black women critics – Trudier Harris, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, to name a few – have cautioned not to be fooled by images of power

and strength that dominate the representation of black women because that ruse, if you will, only works to mask the ongoing oppressions that black women face on a daily basis. On the mythic strength of black women, bell hooks writes convincingly that most advocates and sympathizers of this position “ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation” (hooks 6).

Likewise Harris, whose book *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, explores the problems of the strong black woman and writes that

Conceptualization of black female character ... has fallen into the creative trap or paradox of finding a way out of traditional stereotypes by reinvigorating an old one whose myriad shades do not ultimately overcome the basic problem of limitation. The superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of black female characters *to the detriment of other possibilities* and have potentially stymied future directions for the representation of black women. (10-11, emphasis added)

I am intrigued by Harris’s mention of “other possibilities” for the representation of black women. On one level, perhaps the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century emergence of a host of post-Civil Rights representations of Big Mama by men could be a gesture toward what I am calling a transgressive (queer) performance. While I do not think Harris includes (queer) representations of black women as a “future direction” per se, I would like to consider it as an option. (Queer) representations of black women may offer an alternative lens through which previously unheard and unrepresented identities can be considered. In a lot of ways, this kind of symbolic visibility is the hopeful potential I envision through the use of mama’s gun, and its destabilization of confining norms intersecting at the site of gender, sexuality and motherhood. Queer or not, though, Harris’ observation advocates for the development of a culturally relevant and recognizable way outside of “traditional stereotypes” of Mammy and Matriarch, but this new character still falls into the “problem of limitation” and continues to reify the “superficial

attractions of strength,” which seem performatively attached to the visual representation of Big Mama.

I want to invoke Foucault’s connection between power and the body when I make the observation that there seems to be in the case of black mothers a much more complicated connection between power and the body. Rather than a one-to-one symbolic correlation – that is, physical size equals social power – Big Mama’s large size and other physical references continue to call back to the earlier, less empowered versions of motherhood: Mammy and Matriarch. Despite Big Mama’s mythically revered status within black communities, the visual markers of her “type” act performatively, reproducing the troublesome history and politics of race and gender that black women have been struggling against for centuries. My argument proposes that the positively reverential reading that some have placed on performance of black mothers by black men that these assumptions rely problematically on what Spillers calls the “reproduction of ideology” manifest through the “magnificently physical” image of “Big Mama.” She is a figure rehearsed, rehashed and suspended in time.

### **‘Magnificently Physical:’ Big Mama, Performance, and the Reproduction of Black Mother**

Big Mama emerges as a powerful contemporary figure within black popular culture in response to the tenacious “controlling images” of black mothers that preceded her, namely The Mammy and The Matriarch. Physically speaking, the Big Mama figure possesses qualities found within both images. She is fat, large breasted to the point of excess, and is usually dark skinned. Her natural hair is either covered by a handkerchief or by a fairly obvious looking wig. However, Big Mama is distinct in the sense that her development stems from efforts by both black women and men to re-read the excessive traits of Mammy (docile) and Matriarch (domineering) through a positive and empowering lens. Unlike those powerless and voiceless figures of the past, Big

Mama parlays her physical appearance of strength into a vocal power that allows her to speak her mind in ways that her predecessors never could.

Patricia Hill Collins describes how this formulation of power and strength emerged for black women. For black women, the historic legacy of slavery as well as African cultural retentions in the diaspora have necessarily created a view of motherhood that revolves around community, group survival, identity formation, and empowerment (“Shifting” 48). White feminist theories of motherhood assume, for example, that black women’s everyday lives operate in discrete realms of work and family, public and private, or that black women’s most pressing liberatory concerns are for their own, individual freedoms, rather than that of their collective racial and/or ethnic groups. However, black women continue to clarify how their lives do not adhere to the models of motherhood expressed by the dominant culture. Within many black communities the status and advancement of an individual woman often has as much to do with her cultivation of others, especially children, as it does with the development of “self.” Add to that the value placed on collective action and community building that came out of the civil-rights and black nationalist movements and it becomes clear that mothering work and child-rearing take on a prominent and powerful role in black culture that works on both theoretical and vernacular levels. As a result of these influences, a rhetoric of empowerment, Collins argues, becomes the central theme within black women’s articulations of motherhood, particularly in the image of the Big Mama.

Madea in Tyler Perry’s plays and movies exemplifies the Big Mama character. In the play “I Can Do Bad All By Myself” (1998), Madea answers a phone call from Aunt Myrtle, who is described as a devout, “saved” Christian woman. Madea, who does not attend church and is vocally critical of those who do, listens to Aunt Myrtle pray on the telephone. Clearly annoyed at

the prayer, Madea rolls her eyes as she listens to the woman, and eventually takes the phone from her ear and puts it down on the table. Madea ignores the woman and finally says “She know she ain’t got no power.” The humor of the lines come from Madea’s complete disregard for Aunt Myrtle’s piety, as well as the brusque and off-hand manner in which Madea delivers the quip. More important, however, the line demonstrates how power situates itself in the body of the black mother, that is, Madea, rather than some other source, even faith in God.

Comparatively speaking, Aunt Myrtle possesses little to no power in the context of the play as compared to a woman like Madea, who tells another character “I’m six feet tall, 68 years old, 352 pounds. I can say what I wanna say.” Madea controls every situation that she finds herself in through her loud voice and impressive size.

When her voice and size do not work, she also uses a gun that she carries in her handbag to threaten others. She is a stern disciplinarian of all the children in her care. In another scene in the same play, Madea tells her teen-aged great-granddaughter “Girl, I will beat the hell out of you” when the child enters the house with a bad attitude and refuses to speak respectfully to Madea. After that admonishment, the child complies immediately and treats her elder with respect. That she is able to command respect, reverence, and compliance at the sound of her voice (and when that is ineffective is unafraid to wield physical force) demonstrates the power of a Big Mama figure such as Madea. Her mockery of Aunt Myrtle’s faith in the power of Christian salvation gestures toward her own omnipotence and omnipresence. It would be a stretch to say that in the black community Big Mama’s influence is thought to be superior to a spiritual higher being, but the *performance* of Madea shows how deeply black vernacular culture conceives maternal power and how much the popular imaginary invests in the performance of her by-now familiar claims to strength.

Hortense Spillers, in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar,” explains how the empowerment mythic emerges from a historically situated “de-gendering” of black women via the experience of captivity during the colonial quest. Black women were literally and figuratively stripped of the protection of symbolic femininity in the public sphere – on the auction block, in the coffle, on the whipping post, in and out of the fields – which allowed for a more thoroughgoing exploitation of their sexual, physical and reproductive labor. Black women could be used by dominant members of social body in any way because black women were not in possession of the recognizable gender marker of “woman,” a demarcation that sheltered many white women from abuse.

Black women’s one claim to womanhood was through maternity, a connection still tenuous because of the saturation in the national imagination of black women’s masculine mystique. Black mothers, Spillers argues, only become “powerful” in contemporary terms because legal enslavement removed access to the “law of the father” for captive children. Slave children followed the condition of the mother, but received no benefit or social legitimacy in this arrangement. Mothers themselves held no legal claim to their descendants nor did they possess any real day-to-day control over children’s lives. However, since the law of the father represents “the prevailing social fiction” in the United States, the matricentric kinship system enforced by slave codes represents a source of degradation and abjection for the black female subject (228). This derivation of the black Matriarch symbol explains the strength of character that could exert itself only in the home, and there only very little, but whose mythical “strength” made her seem like a man. However, that masculinity was also limited in scope because her kinship units did not conform to heteronormative and patriarchal ideal of family. In other words, Spillers makes the point that black women’s maternal strength is in legal and economic terms a reality of limited

power; it is unrecognizable, unvalued and outside the symbolic economy of the dominant culture.

As I have stated earlier, I consider Big Mama to be an extraction of qualities of The Mammy and The Matriarch. The fusion of the expressive and visual qualities found in these two national archetypes exemplifies an African-American cultural adaptation in response to the legacy of these “controlling images.” Controlling images, Patricia Hill Collins explains, distinguish themselves from stereotypes in that their deployment works to justify the institutional oppression of black women (69). Mammy, by far the most powerful and enduring and complicated of all the controlling images emerged in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as a means for the white Southern planter class to portray race-relations positively to the mounting abolitionist cause. Nevertheless, the benevolent nurturer transcended her original purpose and became a universally recognized portrait of black female existence in the United States. Patricia A. Turner, who cites Aunt Chloe in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) as the first literary Mammy, describes how the “dark skinned, rotund, benevolent black woman” became an American icon symbolizing desire and longing for plantation life, including the distorted picture of content black women who lived their lives on behalf their white masters, mistresses and children.<sup>9</sup>

Mammy is positively maternal, but the nurturing energies that are symbolized by her exaggerated breast size were never focused toward the care and well-being of her own black children. Instead, her fat flesh and ample bosom provided the sustenance, literally and figuratively, for whites only. Her size, strength, and departure from white female beauty standards distinguished her as outside of the political and social economy of white femininity and womanhood. Her image, therefore, was also deployed through institutions of church,

schools, and media to police white male sexual attraction toward black women. The physicality of Mammy, most often represented as excess – heaving voluptuous bosom, wide girth, a fat, smiling face spilling out from underneath a head rag – is mitigated by her obsequious and servile nature. Her subservience keeps her physical bulk in check, so to speak, rendering her a non-violent and non-threatening entity, which helped ameliorate white fears of the physically strong, sexually desirable and rebellious black female.

The antebellum “Tom Shows,” modeled after characters in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, gave birth to a stage Mammy, who initially was performed by white men dressed in blackface and costume, a practice that continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup>-century (Turner 45). A legacy of drag performance, therefore, foregrounds the accumulation of meaning found within this particular representation of black womanhood. All of the qualities that attach themselves to Mammy arise from this initial moment of spectacle. Since the notion of performativity relies on a reiteration and citation of a set of particular norms repeated over time, it follows that one must consider the history of those articulations in order to recognize their manifestations in current contexts. Judith Butler explains:

Performativity is thus not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated. (12)

In other words, for a particular “act” or “performance” of a particular norm to acquire the perception of it as a singular, theatrical moment, the historical referent for that “act” or “performance” must be disguised, hidden, masked, and forgotten. Drag performance of Mammy participates in this sort of selective erasure, so that what has calcified in the national imagination is not the ways white men controlled and determined the features of the “authentic” black

Mammy through a physical occupation of the gendered and racialized black female body, but rather what is recalled is her stylized visual representation.

Butler also adds that the “act” or “performance” becomes essential to the production of a subject who in turn constructs herself as the “originator” of her performance (13). So, not only is the historical referent of a particular performance muted within social relations and discourses of normative cultural intelligibility, but also it must remain concealed within the subjectivity through which it acts. Therefore, when black actresses Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers portray Mammy figures in the films *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Imitation of Life* (1934) respectively, the white male performance of Mammy had become so recognizable and assimilated by black women performers that they could be Mammy successfully too.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, black women who did not make a living as professional performers adapted this version of black motherhood into their subjectivity, a phenomenon described by E. Patrick Johnson as he researched the life of his grandmother.<sup>11</sup>

If Mammy was wholly white-identified – that is, her labor as mother was focused upon white children – then her counterpart The Matriarch occupied the other end of the spectrum. The Matriarch’s mothering work was fully directed toward the raising of black children, and on occasion childish and child-like black men (Collins 75). As controlling images, however, the functions of the two types were the same: to justify oppression and control of black women. The Matriarch – strong, aggressive, loud, asexual and domineering – offered an image that justified black male social disenfranchisement as well as explained to the dominant culture the inherent dysfunction of black families. Masking the social, political and economic inequality that dictated black life, the image of the black matriarch presented for the dominant culture a reason to explain their perceptions of black inferiority. Racism was not the problem, black mothers were.

Within the logic of white patriarchy, the black matriarch usurped the traditional Western family structure that placed men at the head of families and instead headed these families herself, with or without male support. This matriarchy theory, advanced by both black and white men alike, concentrated its power around the reinforcement of gender hierarchies. All women were kept in check through the negative imagery of the matriarch. Since she did not conform to Western patriarchy, the Matriarch was aberrant. She was dispossessed of femininity, returning to Spillers' point. The perceived failures of her family were blamed on her pathological gender identification. White women, and other non-black women, could mark their femininity against this black female "other."

Like the image of Mammy, The Matriarch establishes herself performatively within the subjectivities of black women. While documents such as *The Moynihan Report* (1965) and DuBois's *The Negro American Family* (1969) sought to describe The Matriarch through the disciplinary lens of sociology, black women came to assimilate this version of themselves offered in social science and acted as Strong Black Women. Trudier Harris traces the appearance of these kinds of characters in her text *Saints, Sinners and Saviors*. Even though the Matriarch type was most often portrayed by black women, she still possessed the composite physical characteristics that describe Mammy. Think of Esther Rolle's performance of Mama Lena in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" or her starring turn on television's *Good Times* as Florida Evans, or even actress Isabel Sanford, who starred as Louise Jefferson in the popular 1970s program, *The Jeffersons*. On the surface, Butler's narrative of performativity and subjectivity may seem to foreclose the possibility of agency for the individuals in question, in this case black mothers, but Butler and other scholars, have offered ideas about the transgressive possibilities that can be teased out of performance theory. These will be important considerations

for later in the chapter. However, the point I have tried to advance thus far is the necessity of historicizing performative citations of strong black mothers in order to reveal the socially mediated materiality and legibility of any performative bodily utterance.

It is critical to situate how the Big Mama figure and her performative claims to the characteristics of strength and power play off of the complex fantasy of gender in the national imagination. Spillers' insights into the construction of black women's racialized gender identity in the United States have led to my observations on the role of drag in the performances of Big Mamas. There is no coincidence that the most prominent popular portrayals of Big Mama come from men, because the history and legacy of her foremother, Mammy, who was originally portrayed by men. So unlike other drag performances of "women" by "men," which trade on the male transgression of femininity, and also glamour and spectacle of the archetypal female form, the specific portrayal of Big Mama by black men does not work in quite the same way because the black mother figure is always already outside of that symbolic economy of femininity. To be sure, there are aspects of femininity, glamour, and spectacle that pervade black male drag culture in both its popular and underground manifestations, which will be discussed in the case of RuPaul, but I am also interested in how Tyler Perry's use of drag to perform Madea navigates this difficult history and contemporary moment simultaneously.

**"Agency is Such a Drag for Those in Power! If You Don't Believe Me, Ask Your Mama!"<sup>12</sup>**

If, as E. Patrick Johnson and others suggest, drag and cross-dressing has transgressive and transformative potential for destabilizing heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality, can this also be true of black male performances of Big Mama, considering her difficult conception and delivery? How does Tyler Perry's performance of Madea both participate in and transgress the "traditional stereotypes" of black mothers? How does Tyler Perry's performance of Madea slip in and out of drag, and what does that indicate about the

creation of the black mothering subject? Whether Perry (and other men posing as Big Mamas) intends to, he cannot escape the cultural economy through which he speaks and commodifies himself. Taking up a number of insights revealed by cultural critics and queer theorists alike, an argument can be made that Perry's drag is a (queer) performance, or even is an exemplary of the queerness that already pervades black culture. Queer, in this case being conceived of as any set of social and cultural expressions that challenge the norms of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Cross-dressing and drag, specifically, become potential sites for performers to work through what Judith Butler calls "disavowed attachments" (276). My analysis, however, proposes that the transformative potential held within the space of drag performance wanes, if not disappears, for Madea because of her claims to an authenticity that never existed.

It may be instructive to return to the question of legitimacy posed in the epigraph to distinguish Perry's performance from the others in this chapter. The demarcation between the illegitimacy of the man with curlers in his hair (from the epigraph) and the authenticity of a "real" Madea lies at the complicated of the site of gender performance, performativity and sexuality: "The authentic ones (my mother and aunt included)...were not *trying* to be this Madea person. The responsibility of the neighborhood simply fell on them" (Perry xii). This observation foregrounds the performative nature of gender, insofar as, women do not perform motherliness, they cannot "try" to be motherly. Instead their black motherhood – its implications of strength and nurturance, and its corporeal attachments to the spectacle of the female body -- inheres to the subjectivities of these black women, enacting that which it names. Therefore, black women are interpellated into the gender schema and iconography of this particular mode of black motherhood, which Perry naturalizes.

More than that Perry's observations beg the question of where he sees himself in this gendered equation. As a man, is he also illegitimate as a Madea? The "lexicon of legitimation," described by Judith Butler, delineates the contours of one's power over another's "public and recognizable sense of personhood" (105). It is a power that also relies in a Foucaultian sense upon the normative values of the bourgeois family, a construct through which desire, sexuality, and sexual practice is scrutinized, disciplined, and legitimated. Because Perry's performances as Madea are ultimately used to enforce black middle-class family values (despite its multiple references to non-traditional networks of kinship within black communities), I believe he is seen by his audiences as not only legitimate in drag, but also possessing the authority/privilege of deeming others illegible in the social world. Therefore, the man with the curlers in his hair is deemed illegitimate, because he lacks the "natural" capacity for maternal behavior possessed by black women and because his performance is tangential to the dominant model of the nuclear family. Perry's cultural work can sidestep marginalization within black popular culture because of his intentional exclusion of queer possibility and reification of black patriarchy and black "family values" within his performances.

Whereas drag performer RuPaul's invocation of her "Supermodel" persona a decade ago works what Seth Clark Silberman calls "a clever signifying on the myth of the black mother," Tyler Perry's broad comedic performance of Madea eschews much of the radical possibility available in not only the depiction of transgressive mothering outlined in previous chapters, but also the radical possibilities of drag and the cultural practice of signifyin'. Charles Nero identifies signifying as a technique essential to the inclusion of black gay male voices into the body of African-American literature, providing a revision of the "Black Experience" within African American literature, a way for black gay men to "create a space fore themselves" (401).

Rather than do the cultural work suggested by Nero and demonstrated by RuPaul, Madea appeals to a kind of “nostalgic authenticity,” which resonates strongly in the post-civil rights moment for a wide spectrum of black audiences (Silberman 86). While a number of black artists and writers struggle to break from ossified notions of blackness to create their own New Black Aesthetic(s), there remains a vigorous consumption of popular works, Madea plays and films included, that appeal to the problematic construction of an essential black experience and an authentic black (mother) subject.<sup>13</sup> Essentializing can be deployed as a socio-political strategy, as suggested by cultural critics ranging from Paul Gilroy to bell hooks, yet, within the context of Perry’s work, I agree with E. Patrick Johnson’s observation that “when black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome...excluded more voices than it included” (3). Perry’s Madea character participates in this kind of exclusive work, appealing particularly to audiences who are attracted to Madea plays for their sense of authenticity: “it’s not only humorous, but it’s real” (K. Johnson, par. 31).

This is not to say that Madea’s character is not subversive. I would like to highlight at least two textual moments that nod toward the untapped potential in this performance: Madea’s baritone voice and her diva impersonations. In the filmed versions of the plays “I Can Do Bad All By Myself” and “Madea’s Class Reunion,” Tyler Perry, who is almost always seen in drag and in character as Madea, slips out of Madea’s voice and into his own. As Madea, Perry generally affects a woman’s voice that is not exactly high-pitched but is a caricature of a woman’s voice. For this voice, Perry says: “My aunt inspired the ...the voice. She overpronounces her words and puts an r on everything to make it sound proper” (P. Johnson, par. 10). However, at abrupt moments in the dialogue, Perry speaks in his natural voice, a smooth baritone, that stands out against Madea’s sound. For a moment, then, Perry slips out of character

and vocally calls attention to the construction of Madea. Her authenticity as a brash, but caring mother figure in the black community gives way to the already obvious fact that she is being played by a man. The moment elicits laughs from the audience, and works what Kate Davy calls a subversive wink, a sly but knowing acknowledgement between performer and audience that “(re)assures its audiences of the ultimate harmlessness of play” (qtd. in Stallings, 168).

Camp also comes into play through what I will call Madea’s diva impersonations. The best example of this appears in the filmed version of the play “Madea’s Class Reunion.” In one scene Madea sits with a woman at a hotel café as they discuss family and relationships. To make her point Madea abruptly breaks into song and begins performing songs by Patti LaBelle, Diana Ross and Whitney Houston. Acting as Whitney Houston, Madea sings the song “I Will Always Love You,” taking care to exaggerate the performance as she sings the difficult, sustained high notes that are the signature of the song. After Madea performs the song, she refuses to be addressed as “Madea” and instead only answers to the name “Whitney” because she is so fully overcome with Whitney Houston’s persona.

This layered representation of several black women situates Tyler Perry within queer culture. The audience, so engrossed in the “authentic” spectacle of Madea – remember Madea is still dispensing her sassy Big Mama wisdom in this particular scene – is lead to find humor when Madea then “becomes” yet another persona. Tyler Perry’s choice of Whitney Houston as the female identity to assume also harkens to the camp aspects of drag, in which male performers take on the stage personalities of “divas.” Diva by definition refers to the lead female singer in an opera, but the word is also related to the term “prima donna,” a temperamental and conceited person, and is also linked to its Latin root meaning “goddess.” In the vernacular, divas are those performers known for giving stunning, show-stopping performances, but also are notorious for

their difficult personalities. Impersonating divas, such as Houston, Cher, Tina Turner, and Diana Ross, is a staple of male drag performance, and drag performer RuPaul describes how successful diva performances rely on the choice of the right song and the right personality: “You have to live the song, every breath, and every beat. Beyond that it doesn’t really matter if you know the words or not...If the attitude is right, the words are the last thing you need” (113). Less about content than gesture and spectacle, the diva performance is critical to drag. Seeing Tyler Perry-as-Madea-as-Whitney Houston complicates this exchange, but nonetheless harkens to the camp aesthetics found in drag performance.

Entertainer RuPaul Charles, who only goes by his first name on stage, emerged in American popular culture during the 1990s with a style of drag performance that was also accessible to the mainstream. Coming of age in the world of drag queen culture in Atlanta and New York, RuPaul distinguished himself in the mainstream through a drag persona that was every bit as fierce and glamorous as major queens at the clubs, but one that emphasized love, rather than the catty, bitchy attitude associated with glamour queens.<sup>14</sup> He developed a persona – RuPaul, Supermodel of the World – who he has said is based on his mother, who was known to call herself a “bold, black bitch” (26). His mother was so much of an influence and inspiration that he devotes a chapter to Ernestine Charles in his 1995 autobiography, *Lettin It All Hang Out*:

[My mother] was my ultimate inspiration because she was the first drag queen I ever saw. She had the strength of a man and the heart of a woman. She could be hard as nails, but also sweet and vulnerable – all the things we love about Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Diana Ross. To this day when I pull out my sassy persona, it’s (sic) Ernestine Charles that I am channeling. (32)

Ernestine Charles had a strong personality that strayed from the idyllic image of mothers in the 1960s. She cursed heavily around her children and was prone to violent outbursts against romantic rivals. Divorced when RuPaul was in elementary school, she raised her son and two daughters on welfare alone in San Diego. Despite being a “bold, black bitch” that her children

feared, RuPaul remembers his mother lovingly; from her “I learned how to stand up for myself. I learned how to break away from the pack, how to do my own thing” (32). Typically, in male coming-of-age narratives the qualities of independence and individualism that are the hallmark of traditional masculinity derive from the father, or at least some other male role model. Yet, in RuPaul’s story the combined qualities – glamour and independence – which operate at seemingly opposite ends of a gendered spectrum, are transmitted through the mother.

RuPaul’s drag differs from Perry’s in the sense that RuPaul diverges from the typically frumpy, lumpy image of the black mother, be it Mammy, Matriarch or Big Mama. Like Tyler Perry, RuPaul claims that his inspiration comes from his mother, but RuPaul shows his version of mother through “Supermodel,” an homage to his mother “Mean Miss Charles.” RuPaul writes: “My mother was a fashion plate...she was the best dressed woman in the United States. Simple but elegant” (23). In the black vernacular, “mean” possesses two connotations: one describes a person who is not nice, the other describes a person or thing that is stylish, and well-put together, akin to the vernacular term “bad.” So RuPaul’s invocation of “Mean Miss Charles” works on at least two levels, describing his mother’s disposition – she was known to curse at his friends when they visited – but also her sense of style and sense of self. Therefore, RuPaul’s performance of the black mother figure is adorned in tight-fitting dresses, sexy high heels, and blond wigs, which defy the normative performative image of the black mother.

RuPaul’s sexuality also stands out in his performance. While Madea does talk about sexuality – she makes a quip about how a Lenny Williams song led to one of her pregnancies – this kind of expression is always mediated by her visual symbolism. Mammy and Matriarch were both conceived of as undesirable and asexual women and that symbolic history is written all over their large bodies. And though Big Mama certainly has much more freedom to talk about her

sexuality and desire than her predecessors, the fact that she is still encased in the body of Mammy makes this kind of talk work for laughs rather than make a subversive statement.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to suggest that *New Yorker* theater critic and essayist Hilton Als offers an option for further research because he does not literally “perform” his version of his mother, who he calls The Negress. Although I will not fully explore the potential in his conception of The Negress in this chapter, I do want to suggest a further direction of study that could include a kind of literary performance of the black maternal figure. Most immediately, I also think of the work of Langston Hughes, and the way in which he adopts the persona of black mothers in his poems “Mother to Son” and “The Negro Mother.” Nevertheless, the Negress is Als performance of his mother, which he explains in his collection of essays “The Women.” Als writes:

For years before and after her death, I referred to myself as a Negress; it was what I was conditioned to be. And yet I have come no closer to defining it. In fact, I shy away from defining it, given my mother’s complex reaction to Negressity for herself and me. I have expressed my Negressity by living, fully, the prescribed life of an auntie man – what Barbadians call a faggot. (9)

Als makes a direct connection between his homosexuality and his Negressity. Yet, as his memoir continues, his version of The Negress is constructed out of a fierce opposition to the kind of mother I have heretofore described as Big Mama. Als juxtaposition of The Negress and black women writers of the 1960s and 1970s highlights a deep problem with the assertive voices that emerged from these poets and novelists. The Negress was strong, but lacked the kind of vocal power and will that is evident in other portrayals. Any analysis of Als’ work would have to take into account the particular kind of mother Als valorizes and why, and the ways she is the anti-Big Mama. Whether his queer work also works effectively within the framework of mama’s gun will be a topic for further consideration at a later phase in this project.

Overall Tyler Perry's performance eschews the kind of elements found in RuPaul's drag. The subversive winks are there, but without the signifyin' and without a transformation of visual imagery, Perry's performance stops short of its full transgressive potential. The popularity of Tyler Perry as Madea seems, in large part, to reflect what Hortense Spillers calls the "replication of ideology" that is encased via the visual representation of black women, that is "never simple in the case of female subject-positions, and it appears to acquire a thickened layer of motives in the case of African-American females" (227). Certainly Tyler Perry has made it clear he wishes to exercise the "power of 'yes' to the female within," but does this kind of performance "gain insurgent ground" for a new female social subject as Spillers advocates? (228) What is at stake are not only questions of authenticity and essentialism in contemporary U.S. culture, but also the advancement of new imaginative resources for the representation of black mothers in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> As a testament to the Perry's value as a cinema draw for black audiences, the production and distribution company Lionsgate signed Perry in 2007 to a three-year film deal and DVD distribution deal. [http://www.upi.com/Entertainment\\_News/2008/07/24/Tyler\\_Perry\\_inks\\_new\\_deal\\_with\\_Lionsgate/UPI-61381216930220/](http://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/2008/07/24/Tyler_Perry_inks_new_deal_with_Lionsgate/UPI-61381216930220/) <accessed on November 8, 2008>

<sup>2</sup> Perry's early success has been linked to his appearances as Madea, but he has been making fewer appearances in the fat-suit and house dress. His most recent movies *Why Did I Get Married* and *The Family that Preys* and, his 10<sup>th</sup> stage play, "The Marriage Counselor," do not feature Madea at all. She makes an appearance occasionally as Madea in "The House of Payne," a network sit-com produced by Perry.

<sup>3</sup> For the most part, Perry's character has been criticized by from pop culture and theater critics alike, who say his work is a form of "cooning" for the millennial age, portraying black women negatively. Much of the criticism reflects the comments of Todd Boyd, a professor of race and popular culture at University of Southern California, who said "His films represent a 'rebirth of the Stepin Fetchit' mentality.' ... [they are] 'the product of an increasingly visible right-wing evangelical Christian culture. Tyler Perry is the blackface version of that.'" Ruth La Ferla, "Sometimes Piety Isn't Squeaky Clean" *The New York Times* 14 Oct. 2007, late ed.: Style 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lindon Barrett perceptively writes about Dennis Rodman's ability to be seen as "simply as one of the boys" despite his public cross-dressing during his NBA career during the late 1980s and 1990s. Barrett writes that Rodman "remains in the popular mind neither a drag queen nor one of the innumerable and easily assimilated comedians or actors who make their living by drawing on long and various traditions of male drag in the West. Dennis Rodman--to employ a cliché--is "something else." See "Black Men in the Mix: Badboys, Heroes, Sequins and Dennis Rodman" in *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997) 106-126. I argue, however, that "something else" is distinct from "one of the boys," and that Rodman's style defied the limits of acceptable black masculinity.

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<sup>5</sup> Madeas appear in black women's fiction, most notably the ghost-mother Mudear in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family*. Terry McMillan also has a short story, "Ma'Dear," which interestingly does not feature a mother figure, but rather tells the story of an aging black women. Outside of the African-American tradition, there is the figure of Medea from the Euripedes play. In that classic Greek tragedy, Medea murders her children in a fit of jealousy after her husband falls in love with another woman.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the connections and disjunctions between performance and performativity and their implications within critiques of race, gender, and sexuality, see Jacque Derrida, *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993), and E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of the "other" in black feminist criticism, see Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" and Valerie Smith, *Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the "Other."*

<sup>8</sup> I appreciate the editorial consideration from Angelique V. Nixon, who helped me think through the idea of performance as a "disguise," with all of its connotations of concealment and deception.

<sup>9</sup> Though Stowe's serialized novel was written as a expression of her abolitionist views, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has become associated with popularizing on a mass scale some of the most troubling images of black slave existence.

<sup>10</sup> McDaniel became the first black person to win an Academy Award for her portrayal of this "beloved" figure.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 4 " 'Nevah Had Uh Cross Word:' Mammy and the Trope of Black Womanhood" in Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness* for more detail.

<sup>12</sup> See Johnson, "Strange Fruit: A Performance about Identity Politics." *The Drama Review* 47:2 (Summer 2003) 88-116

<sup>13</sup> Black comedian David Alan Grier spoofed the proliferation of black mother characters portrayed by men on his variety show "Chocolate News" in 2008.

<sup>14</sup> For more on drag culture, see Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

CHAPTER 6  
I KNOW YOU NOT TALKIN' 'BOUT MY MAMA: FINAL THOUGHTS ON MAMA'S GUN  
AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSGRESSION

The inspiration for this entire project emerged from my interest in and concern with the overwhelmingly present, but also absent figure of the black mother in contemporary U.S. culture. What I mean is this: I am struck by how black maternal figures seem so common and visible in contemporary popular culture – those Big Mamas, neo-Mammies, Baby Mamas and others that I have mentioned – yet the multiple voices of the women that these figures are supposed to represent are distorted or silenced all together. As a black woman who has children, a mother, I feel somehow connected to these representational images, their caricature stands in sharp relief to my lived reality, and yet I wonder how and when my real presence is interpellated into this matrix of visibility and erasure. I began this project from that vantage point, and in the months spent researching, I have sharpened my focus upon particular kinds of maternal figures, ones that I have identified as transgressive, and I have explored how they are used by contemporary African-American intellectuals, writers and artists. I have tried to consider how their transgressive narratives may or may not have the power to talk back to – or just plain curse out – those ideologies that require black mothers to be seen and not heard in the public spheres of politics, media, or academia. I have tried to offer examples of transgressive maternal figures whose fictional presence asks the questions: Can you really heal through defiance? Can you really mother with a gun?

I would say yes, but to see these metaphors as possible requires one to problematize traditional connections between maternal symbolism and gender. Motherhood may have to be decoupled from ideals of femininity, or even the category “woman,” for this kind of analysis to make sense. Not a permanent separation, but a provisional one that allows one to read maternal

metaphor within some non-traditional, non-normative examples. I am really encouraged by the work on the “mother without child” done by Elaine Tuttle Hansen because I think her work examines these possibilities in a wide range of contemporary women’s writing. At stake in the African American literary field may be the recuperation maternal figures whose appearances in contemporary texts defy traditional readings.

As a way of conclusion, or, perhaps as a nod to future directions for this project, I would like to consider one more potential example of the use of mama’s gun: black women comedians. I began my interest in the work of black women comedians after re-watching a 1990s animated film called *Bebe’s Kids*, which is a spinoff of a stand-up routine performed by the late black male comic Robin Harris. In *Bebe’s Kids*, viewers are introduced to a trio of mischievous, rambunctious siblings raised by a poor, black mother. In the movie, the male character “Robin” dislikes the children because they misbehave and have “no home training;” his anger culminates in several humorous riffs against their mother, Bebe. I realized while watching the movie again recently that we do not ever hear from Bebe. In this way, she is simultaneously present – we see her image and hear jokes made about her – but also absent because she never gets a chance to speak for herself. It is a double move of inscription and erasure. So I started to wonder: What would a woman like Bebe say in response to Robin? What kind of snaps, caps, dozens, lyin’ and signifyin’ would she do? How might she use her mama’s gun?

Watching this film encouraged me consider these questions by turning my ear toward cultural moments in which black women respond to and critique the fears of irresponsible black mothers and the phantasm of their socially maladjusted black children. I turn to the African-American vernacular tradition of humor, because, as Daryl Cumber Dance notes, “if there is any one thing that has brought African American women whole through the horrors of the middle

passage, slavery, Jim Crow, Aunt Jemima, the welfare system, integration, the OJ Simpson trial, and Newt Gingrich, it is our humor.” Beyond its capabilities as an emotional outlet, humor possesses subversive dimensions.

I will concentrate on two prevailing themes black women comedians use to give voice to their perspectives on motherhood, although there are others that I have been able to identify. The themes that I will discuss here are the racialized discipline of children and the notion of the “working mother.” Other humorous themes not included here include riffs on black children’s names and sexuality in motherhood. These themes recur with some regularity throughout both black male and female comedic texts, and in both folk and performance contexts. However, I will argue that there is a specific politics of transgression that black women employ through their use of these particular types of jokes. In the mouths of black women, these humorous themes become a way to blast through controlling images through creative self-fashioning, self-definition, and reclaimed subjectivity.

I have explored a number of sources of black women’s expressive culture, including collections of folk material and literature, particularly the important work collected by Dance. However, I will concentrate on contemporary black female performance; particularly the women involved in the “Def Comedy Jam” circuit and featured in the film the “Queens of Comedy.” There is, I think, significance to the kind of work done by the “Queens of Comedy” in regards to the fusion of a hip-hop sensibility within a long-standing tradition of black funny women. As Doveanna Fulton notes it is difficult to extract the work of these comediennes from their hip-hop contexts; their stand-ups are infused with the music and fashion of hip-hop as well as the performance of the familiar trope of the “fly girl.” Keeping in mind that black women’s humor historically has most often been shared among women within the private spaces of the home,

church, and women's clubs, it is important to note when this jesting extends beyond those spaces and into the public realm. The transition of black women's humor from behind closed doors to standing room only is important for understanding the traditions that contemporary black women use to signify on dominant stereotypes about them.

The first theme major theme involved the racialized discipline of children. Comedienne Adele Givens addresses this theme in *The Queens of Comedy* concert. To set up her joke, Givens talks about a Jenny Craig commercial in which a woman (presumably white, but not described specifically) says that her daughter woke up and told her "Mommy, you're fat!" Givens insinuates racial difference by mocking a "proper" white-sounding voice, to make it clear she is imitating a white woman. In response to the daughter's rude comment, the white mother, says she picked up the phone and called Jenny Craig. Since then she has lost fifteen pounds. Givens continues: "I said 'Yeah, that's good bitch, but you need a new attitude.' Cause had that been me on the commercial it would've went the same way with a different attitude." On stage, Givens pretends that her daughter comes in and says "Mommy, you're fat!" She replies:

So I picked up that phone (Pause) and I knocked that bitch down a flight of stairs. (As she says "knocked" she gestures with her hand as if hitting a small child in the head) I whupped her little ass that day. (Pause) Told her you the reason *why* mama's so fuckin' fat carryin' yo' little bald ass around for nine months.

Here, Givens sets out to make a clear distinction between black and white mothering and discipline. Reflecting an African-American worldview, Givens considers respect for elders of the utmost importance. Therefore, sassy talk from a child to an adult is not to be tolerated. This disciplinary technique attempts to ensure that as children age, they will heed the voices of their mothers who will continue to help guide and protect them into adulthood.

Givens taps the full comedic potential in this passage through repetition and exaggeration. She sets up the two scenarios in the same fashion, using the same phrases. The

surprise and laughter come at the extreme response she gives to her daughter for insulting her weight. Not only does she call her daughter a “bitch,” she also knocks her down a flight of stairs with a phone. These actions disrupt mainstream notions of the “good mother,” and give legitimacy to an alternative black woman’s view. Within Givens’ world, it is unacceptable for a child to disrespect a mother at all, let alone about weight, a concern that has everything to do with childbearing.

The issue of child discipline is an area in which black women signify on their lives as mothers. Part of the pathologizing rhetoric that surrounds black communities suggests that poor mothering is to blame for problems of crime, drug addiction, and unemployment in some black communities. The image of the dominating, castrating matriarch of the 1950s and 1960s has given way in the post Civil Rights era to the equally negative image of the welfare mother or the baby mama. These portraits paint the picture of an ineffectual black woman with no control over her children; their problems are ultimately her failings as a caregiver and disciplinarian. To respond to these perceptions, black women employ the comedic devices of the tall tale and exaggeration. By riffing on issues of discipline, often highlighting examples of extreme discipline, black women intervene in a discourse that paints their children as wild and uncontrollable and their mothering work as incompetent. They also revise the idealized patriarchal male-headed household in which “father knows best.” Black women’s humor about child discipline demonstrates that women participate in this important parental task. Black women intervene with their tall tales about beatings, whuppings, and other extreme forms of corporal punishment. These tales are not to make light of the real problem of child abuse in many families from all backgrounds. However, in their provocative exaggeration, black women set the

stage for valuing their work as mothers, thereby destabilizing the racialized and class-based construct of the “good (white) mother.”

Black women have also used humor to rewrite the “reality” of black women’s mothering work, which is the second theme I will explore. By “mothering work,” I am referring to the critical number of tasks that contribute to raising children, tasks such as food preparation, washing clothes, teaching both academic and life skills, financial planning, emotional support, grocery shopping, discipline, managing school activities, etc. I do not want to suggest that these types of tasks are the exclusive domain of mothers; certainly, fathers do this kind of work. However, I am also aware that in most U.S. families, women remain in charge of these sorts of domestic duties, and their distinction as “good mothers” relies heavily on their management of these various tasks.

However, recent and continuous attacks on the social service system rely on the denial of black women’s mothering work. For the ideology of the “welfare mother” to be successful – especially as it is designed to pull the safety net out from under all people in need – it must portray black mothers as lazy. The lazy black mother is the mother who stays home all day with her children and refuses to work in the paid-labor market. She is portrayed as lacking any skills, unemployable, and dependent on state aid. Even though she stays home with her children, the children are described as unruly and uneducable. The crass hypocrisy and racism embedded in this construction of mothering is brought into sharp relief when held up against the co-existing ideology of the white stay-at-home mother. Just about the time that the “welfare mother” became etched in the national consciousness, staying at home to raise children became revitalized as a white middle-class ideal. The invention of the “soccer mom” allowed white women’s mothering – preparing meals, running errands, keeping house, etc. – to be perceived as “real” work. Studies

appeared that put dollar figures on (white) mothers' work, estimating that they would deserve a six-figure salary for the types of tasks completed daily. Perceptions of the "real" work of white middle-class mothers in this case relies on the uninterrogated sign of the black female body, seen as shiftless and reproductively irresponsible.

Black women, however, flip the script on this idea of mothering work. In her *Queens of Comedy* stand-up, Adele Givens sheds light on the work that black women do, specifically as mothers:

I know some exhausted bitches. I know some women got two jobs, six kids, no man, the bitch got things to do. You hear me? She gotta go to PTA meetings, after school programs, football practice, riverboat casino. This bitch is exhausted. She ain't goin' to no hospital. She cain't. Who's goin' to watch them bad-ass children when she gone?

Givens starts her monologue by comparing average black women to white and black female celebrities who are portrayed in the media. She warns black women not to be seduced by the images of those other women or to think less of themselves because "the hoes ain't real." No need to idealize their experience, she implies; they have nothing to do with realness or actual black female experience.

Here Givens demarcates a distinction that I think is important in contemporary black cultural studies. Within black women's vernacular culture "realness" trumps idealization and fantasy. It is the prioritized expression of everyday life that does not assume pre-existing essences, but rather makes appeals to the legitimacy of experience. I do not want "realness" here to be conflated with the highly commodified notion of "keeping it real," which has come to mean the expression of a singular "authentic" black ghetto experience. "Keeping it real" has been packaged and resold all over the world, and has come to displace actual experience with performances of commodified blackness. Rather, "realness" relies on each woman's testimony

on her own life, which can then be reflected by others. It is therefore contingent, and highly subjective, yet grounded in truth claims from one's own life.

Using the prioritized lens of realness, Givens unleashes her humor in order to respond to the notion of the lazy black mother. Not only does she describe the work of the so-called “soccer mom” – PTA meetings, after-school programs, and football practice – she adds to the list: “two jobs, six kids, no man.” The construction of the hard working “soccer mom” describes a woman of relative economic comfort, who does not work outside of the home, has one or two children and is married. On the other hand, black mothers do all the work of a “soccer mom” and then some. “Real” black mothers are therefore, in Givens’ words, “exhausted bitches.”

I do not want to suggest that humor is or should be the primary response available to black women to revise racist and sexist constructions of their humanity. There are black women politicians, activists, mothers, and workers who have risked their lives to stand up and directly dismantle oppressions affecting their lives. Humor has not – to my knowledge – put an end to discourses that attempt to erase black women, discourses employed to use our bodies as a malleable sign to promote regressive public policy. However, like Hortense Spillers, I want to acknowledge the creative agency with which black women intervene into discourse. Spillers writes that:

In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function. (257)

In this section, as well as this entire project, I have explored the vast collection of “inventiveness” that marks black women’s responses to dominant discourse. These vernacular and literary responses explore how contemporary black women intellectuals, writers and artists are individually and collectively redefine the meanings of “maternal.”

Our understanding of the maternal – its symbolic functions and their effects on black women’s lived experiences – presents a challenge for African-American and American literary and cultural studies at this time. On the one hand, one can see the long-standing appeal of traditional ideals and representations of mothering, which intensify as cultural capital during times of social change, particularly among socially marginalized groups. The post Civil Rights era marks one of these moments of change, and I have argued that in some ways traditional maternal ideologies have found a new visibility and value within a number of nationalist projects. On the other hand, within this period there are significant moments of transgression of these ideals, often emerging from black feminist and womanist theoretical positions, which I have sought to delineate throughout this project. These transgressive notions of motherhood do not explicitly capitulate to the project of nation building in the ways that traditional modes often do, and I have sought to identify the various locations of dissent to which these transgressive modes speak. My early observations regarding the complicated and compelling maternal image of Michelle Obama were meant to suggest some of these tensions regarding the figure of the black mother in the new millennium.

Overall, however, this project has been an effort to piece together a number of disparate sites of racialized maternal symbolism by situating them in contemporary social and political contexts. I have identified the literary and cultural functions of these sites of observation through the relational metaphor of mama’s gun. Returning to the memory of my great-grandmother’s rifle wrapped in soft quilts, I want to re-emphasize what I see as the richness of this scene. It is a site/sight of contrast, contradiction, subversion, concealment, creativity, generation, destruction, defiance and healing, and the works that I have stitched together here exemplify these myriad possibilities. I have purposefully returned to the metaphor of the quilt to describe my work in its

entirety. Already a long-standing symbol of the power of black mothers' creative and collaborative work, the quilt provides a way of thinking about the disparate narratives, genres and cultural modes I have joined together here. Like patches sewn together, this project requires one to step back to appreciate the holistic effect that each part renders to the whole. It is my hope that mama's gun – and the cultural explorations that it germinates – will further contribute to our understanding of black women's creative agency in the recent past, present and future.

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