"A Mother and Fully Human at Once"

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In 1955, Mamie Till Bradley, mother of Emmett Till, “claimed the public role of grieving mother and thus reformulated conceptions of . . . African American motherhood” (Feldstein 266). By seeking justice, refusing to be silenced, and having an open-casket funeral for her slain son, Bradley refused to conform to society’s expectations of her as a black mother. Bradley’s conscious decision to claim “the public role of grieving mother” (266) despite negative perceptions of black mothers in 1950s America is part of a long history of brave, empowered mothering that responds to tragedy, discrimination, and disempowerment by refusing to be confined by stereotypes. The societal expectations to which Bradley refused to conform are summarized in stereotypes such as that of the “bad black mother” who is abrasive, unable or unwilling to care for her children, and at fault for the “failings” of the black family. Indeed, since the time they were enslaved, black mothers in America have endured the burdens of stereotypes and misconceptions. Despite emancipation and the granting of “freedom” in 1865, black mothers remain constrained by unique challenges—including racism, discrimination, and economic inequality—in their efforts to raise resilient, productive, and optimistic children who are prepared for what they will face in a world that tells them their lives do not matter.

Despite these challenges, both real and fictional black mothers, like Bradley, refuse to remain confined by stereotypes. Demonstrating power and strength, black mothers, and fictitious representations of black mothers created by black women, respond in a myriad of ways to the challenges they face. These depictions, which admit to both strength and weakness, fight against the idea that black mothers are inherently “bad mothers” while also challenging the idea that these women must be perfect to be considered “good mothers.” They complicate overly simplified ideas about race and motherhood, sparking conversations about who is considered “motherly” enough to mother and why. Speaking of the difficulty inherent in being a black mother in America, author Tope Fadiran Charlton proclaims:

Part of my struggle is to challenge the notion that good motherhood cannot exist in bodies like mine. But I can tell you something I want even more . . . A world where no litmus test is required for us to see worth and dignity in the beautiful mess of singularities and complexities that we are. This is better than being acknowledged as a Good Mother: to be seen as a mother and fully human at once. This is liberation (184).
Charlton begins by acknowledging the struggle that she, as a black woman, faces to be considered a “good mother.” She speaks of her deeper yearning for a world in which black mothers are considered valid and human, allowed to make mistakes and still be seen as worthy by the world around them—especially the white world, which for so long has viewed black mothers as “less than.” Charlton’s declaration that liberation is found when black women who are mothers can be viewed as both mother and human, “fully human,” highlights the work that literary, musical, and popular culture depictions of black motherhood are doing today. Besides providing representation, the work these women are doing unpacks and debunks myths and false ideas about blackness and womanhood, creating a starting point from which activists can make a difference politically in a variety of ways.

Black mothers and black authors fight back against narrow conceptions of black motherhood, working toward that world Charlton dreams of, whether or not their white peers are watching. In recent years, a surge of fiction by writers like Jacqueline Woodson, Tiphanie Yanique, Stephanie Powell Watts, Jesmyn Ward, Ayana Mathis, Zenzi Clemmons, Yaa Gyasi, and Britt Bennett has created unique and varied perspectives on black motherhood—some which show black mothers succeeding, some which show black mothers failing, and some which show black mothers imperfectly aiding their children through the pitfalls of growing up in a society that does not respect them. It is not only in fiction but also in popular culture, music, news articles, essays, memoirs, and movements (such as Black Lives Matter) that women are making a difference. Speaking out about their experiences, they are refusing to stay silent in spite of oppression that weighs down on them and their children. At other times, they move quietly forward despite obstacles like racism and inequality in their path. They refuse the idea of the “black superwoman,” instead providing a new hero for their children to look up to who is strong and simultaneously flawed—someone who is trying to provide opportunity for her children despite obstacles and imperfections.

By analyzing representations of black motherhood in America, we come to respect the empowering examples of black women who mother and are “human” all at once. Beyond garnering deserved respect, however, these stories spark action, motivating change and creating power for both creator and consumer. The representations refute the notion of “a single story” (Adichie) and do far more than simply counter the stereotype of the “bad black mother” or the “welfare queen.” Instead, reading, listening, and paying attention to these women’s stories complicates the rhetoric and ideas surrounding black motherhood. Complicating these ideas creates space to recognize, discover, and honor the ways in which black mothers in America empower their children and come to find their own power and strength. It also provides space for a diversity of experience, deconstructing the good mother/bad mother dichotomy and instead allowing for complexity and the recognition of humanity. Ultimately, we can glimpse Charlton’s dream of black mothers being viewed as “fully human” (184), propelling actions that will bring us closer to that reality.

**Historical Context**

The prejudice against and stereotypes about black mothers in America can be traced back to their arrival in the United States. In “Us Colored Women Had to Go Though a Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women,” Thelma Jennings details the horrors faced by enslaved women, and specifically enslaved mothers, to illustrate...
their dehumanization. Often, slaveholders controlled enslaved women through threats, since these men could “force them to mate with whomever [they] chose, to reproduce or suffer the consequences, to limit the time spent with their children, and even to sell them and their children” (46). Procreation was forced upon young girls from “the beginning of adolescence” (46), and “after giving birth, most slave mothers usually had to trust the care of their babies to someone else in order to return to the fields. From that time on, the contact they had with their children during the day was limited” (58). On plantations where the fields were far from the slave quarters, mothers were forced to bring their infants to the fields with them. In one of the interviews Jennings recorded, a previously enslaved woman spoke of a mother being “forced to tie her smallest child to a tree limb to keep the ants and bugs from getting on it” (58). Often, mothers were separated from their children, as in the case when “the slave woman herself was sold to Georgia away from her three-month-old baby because the baby’s father was the young master” (64).

These interviews reveal the lack of respect for, or recognition of, enslaved women’s motherhood as legitimate or equal to white women’s motherhood. Motherhood for enslaved women was a bittersweet experience, as their desire to have a family was often superseded by their desire to protect children from being born into a life of slavery. Some enslaved women saw motherhood as a triumph—a way to assert some degree of autonomy, control, and normalcy into their lives (Jennings). For other enslaved women, however, motherhood was a way to be controlled in the future, through threats of harm or separation from their children (Washington 188). Against their will, some enslaved women were forced to leave their own children behind while they cared for the children of the slave owner. In this situation, enslaved women were essentially robbed of their role as mothers to their own children. Such treatment reveals the utter lack of respect white slaveholders had for the familial ties of enslaved peoples.

Although slavery was abolished in 1865, the dehumanizing ideas held by whites about black motherhood did not disappear with the institution. Instead of recognizing the role slavery played in casting black mothers as inherently illegitimate, destroying black families and demonizing black women, white society continued to stigmatize black motherhood. Anthropologists, social workers, and health care professionals made claims about how unfit black women were as mothers. These claims, based on biased perceptions and little else, contributed to stereotypes and ideas about the illegitimacy of black motherhood (Bennett, “Good White People”). The eugenics movement, which in the United States involved “coerced sterilization,” as well as “forced sterilization” done without the individual’s knowledge or consent and aimed at “controlling ‘undesirable’ populations,” was used not only to declare black women unfit to be mothers but to ensure they were not able to bear children (Ko). The program was “federally-funded . . . in 32 states” (Ko). The practice of eugenics on black women was justified for much of the twentieth century as a way to cut welfare costs, since white doctors and lawmakers believed these women unfit to care for children, demonstrating yet again the stigmatization of black motherhood. The phrase “Mississippi Appendectomy,” made popular by Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer with reference to involuntary sterilization (Skloot 50), illustrates the discrimination black women faced regarding their right to motherhood.

Though largely ignored by mainstream society throughout the first half of the 1900s, black Americans became the face of poverty by the mid-1960s. While their plight
had been ignored until the mid-twentieth century, they were now hyper-visible and overrepresented in America’s conscious understanding of poverty. Indeed, “In 1964, only 27 percent of the photos accompanying stories about poverty in three of the country’s top weekly news magazines featured black subjects; the following year, it rose to 49 percent. By 1967, 72 percent of photos accompanying stories about poverty featured black Americans” (Black and Sprague). The infamous Moynihan report was published during the Civil Rights Movement by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Formally titled, The Negro Family: The Case of National Action, this report claimed that black mothers were contributing to the failure of the black family by their aggressive and controlling nature, and that the matriarchal structure of the black family brought with it a host of social ills. To overcome these social problems, the report argued that power and authority in the family needed to be restored to men. Stating “It may well be that [equal employment opportunities] have redounded mostly to the benefit of Negro women, and may even have accentuated the comparative disadvantage of Negro men,” the report argued that black women, especially black mothers, were in a position of power over black men, leading these men to feel emasculated and causing the breakdown of families (Moynihan 33). The report argued that “disgusted with [their] financially dependent husband[s],” black mothers “often act to perpetuate the mother-centered pattern by taking a greater interest in their daughters than their sons” (34). It has been extremely influential in shaping stereotypes of black mothers and laying the blame for the “failure of black families” squarely on their shoulders.

Near the time Moynihan’s report was published, the term “welfare queen” was coined by the Chicago Tribune. While campaigning for president, Ronald Reagan used this term frequently to conjure a stereotype that is well-known today. He and others used the idea of the “welfare queen” to further punish black women for the “failings” of the black family (Levin). Much can be learned by examining the origins of this stereotype. While the Tribune used the term “welfare queen” to describe one specific woman, Linda Taylor, whose race was ambiguous, Reagan used it to construct a stereotype that was applied to black women generally. Altering the story reported about Ms. Taylor by the Tribune, Reagan dramatized and distorted the truth, applying it broadly and thus helping to further popularize the idea of the “bad black mother” wrapped up in the idea of the “welfare queen” (Black and Sprague). Reagan was successful in doing so because the image of black mothers as illegitimate had been normalized over decades. While Linda Taylor, the actual “welfare queen,” was a career criminal whose race is listed as white on her birth certificate, black women have since been saddled with the unflattering and harmful categorization as “the Black welfare queen, the baby mama, women maligned and demonized as everything a mother should not be, foil and shadow to the Good (white) Mother” (Charlton 181). Indeed, by casting black mothers in such an unflattering and harmful light, white politicians were able to scare voters into supporting their policies; policies that rolled back state and federal welfare programs, affirmative action, and the Civil Rights Act (Gomer and Petrella). Both the perceptions left behind by these political attacks against black women and the policies themselves have since negatively affected black mothers and their families in American society.

Mothering in Literature

This complex historical background informs an analysis of contemporary black writing on the theme of motherhood. Considering the fraught historical context, black
women who depict motherhood do so bravely, standing up against years of violent physical oppression, as well as rhetorical and emotional abuse. The goals of their work vary, as do their experiences. Although some of their depictions are created to refute the demonization of black mothers, others aim to reveal the reality of black motherhood through complex characters. Either way, by sharing with readers and viewers a depiction of motherhood and blackness that is varied and unique and all the more empowering for the imperfect strength being shown, these artists and authors refuse to be pinned down by the stereotypes of black motherhood and instead pave the way for a future in which black mothers can be seen as fully human.

Recognizing the power of the written word, in recent years black writers have increasingly turned to depicting black motherhood prominently. Books like *Salvage the Bones; The Twelve Tribes of Hattie; Another Brooklyn; No One is Coming to Save Us; The Mothers; Homegoing; What We Lose; Land of Love and Drowning; Sing, Unburied, Sing; and The Hate U Give* explore complex and flawed mothers who leave, those who stay, and the effects of their presence or absence on their children. As writer Brit Bennett stated, “Writing about ordinary black people is actually extraordinary...It’s absolutely its own form of advocacy” (Alter C1). This “form of advocacy” is valuable because it provides representation that refutes the idea of the “bad black mother” without falling into the trap of creating extraordinary, perfect characters. T. F. Charlton further elaborates on this point in her essay on black motherhood when she discusses the difficulty of navigating race and gender through the lens of motherhood. She shares examples of her motherhood being “viewed as illegitimate, literally and symbolically” (178) by others, but then states, “This is not all of my existence as a Black mother; it doesn’t wholly define me... but it is part of my story” (180). By including negative and positive traits and creating characters who refuse to fit into a box, black writers demand readers reexamine their ideas about black motherhood and its legitimacy and recognize these characters as imperfect, human, strong, and empowering all at once.

In addition, black women claim ownership of their experience as mothers and daughters through writing their own histories. Author Michele Wallace wrote a new foreword to *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* twelve years after the book’s first publication, noting, “Whereas then I spoke of black women making history and being written about, I now think it is more important that black women ‘write’ their own histories, since the power to write one’s own history is what making history appears to be all about” (xxi). The idea that women have a right and a responsibility to write their own histories has been well responded to by the wave of fiction mentioned above as well as in recent non-fiction works, such as *Negroland, Brown Girl Dreaming*, and *My Brown Baby: On the Joys and Challenges of Raising African American Children*. In addition, Tracy K. Smith’s memoir *Ordinary Light*, in which she records both her own story and her mother’s story, takes up the charge issued by Wallace. These nonfiction works illustrate the complexity of black motherhood honestly and vulnerably. In Smith’s memoir, she writes about her complex and multi-faceted relationship with her mother. The honesty with which she reflects upon her mother—as heroic yet imperfectly human—brilliantly demonstrates the empowering pictures of black mothers that are emerging in the work of black authors, artists, bloggers, musicians, and poets. Whether in fiction or nonfiction, black women depict a motherhood that is multi-faceted and complex, adding nuance that humanizes their characters, real or imagined.
In her memoir *Ordinary Light*, Smith credits her mother for a safe home environment, demonstrating the ways that black motherhood personally meant crafting a refuge for children as they prepared to face a world that would treat them as inferior. Reflecting on her childhood, Smith acknowledges the important role her mother played, recognizing:

It was the life she assembled for us . . . a life that would tell us, and the world, if it cared to notice, that we bothered with ourselves, that we understood dignity, that we were worthy of everything that mattered. No matter what the world thought it knew about blacks, no matter what it tried to teach us to believe about ourselves, the home we returned to each night assured us that, no matter who was setting the bar, we could remain certain we measured up. (19)

In this passage, Smith pays homage to the incredible yet often invisible work her mother performed in order to construct a safe space for Smith and her siblings during their formative years. Unlike the stereotype of the welfare queen, Smith’s mother was sacrificial and striving to do great emotional labor on behalf of her children so that they might recognize their worth, even if the world failed to do so. It is this vision of black motherhood—as empowered enough to focus on empowering the next generation—that has too often been absent from portrayals of black motherhood, and is revealed in a wonderful way in Smith’s writing. Likewise, in Angie Thomas’s novel *The Hate U Give*, Starr’s mother provides comfort and safety, both physically, by moving her family out of the projects where riots are occurring, and emotionally, as she sits with Starr through her interviews with the police. We learn that, to Starr, her mother’s “tight squeeze tells [her] what she doesn’t say out loud—I got your back” (Thomas 95). Though she works long hours in order to help provide for her family, especially when they move out of the projects and into a safer but more expensive neighborhood, Starr’s mother is a calming presence throughout the novel, illustrating the ways in which black mothers, sometimes without being noticed, cultivate safe environments in which their children can grow.

This recent wave of writing by black women has often emphasized the role of mothers in helping children confront interpersonal as well as institutional racism, and the role of mothers in nurturing and providing in spite of economic inequality. In Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, the main character, Starr, reflects on the ways her parents have prepared her for what she will face in relation to police brutality. When she and her friend Khalil are pulled over, Starr hopes to herself that “somebody had the talk with Khalil” (21). She remembers when her own parents gave her the talk, when she was twelve years old. Despite her mother “fussing” and telling her father that she was “too young for [it],” her parents come together and tell her “Starr-Starr, you do whatever they tell you to do...keep your hands visible. Don’t make any sudden moves. Only speak when they speak to you” (20). Here, we witness black parents trying to preemptively protect their children from the realities of police brutality and discrimination. We see these parents, particularly these mothers, confronting difficult obstacles and terrifying scenarios because they know they cannot shield them forever. We are reminded that these fears are absolutely real when Starr’s friend, Khalil, is shot by a police officer after being pulled over. In Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the topic of police brutality is addressed yet again, but this time, the mother is less able, less capable, and she has not prepared her child; thus, when confronted by the police, her son, Jojo, “reach[es] in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him” (163). Although Jojo, unlike Khalil, makes it out alive, it is not until this scene that his mother realizes “he’s just a baby” (163), and
while he should not have to face such tense situations, he does and is unprepared to do so. While it is of great importance to recognize the successful, empowered mothers being represented in literature and film, Ward and Thomas do the important work of examining what black motherhood looks like, even in cases in which the mothers make mistakes. By depicting mothers who are human and even tragically flawed, these authors provide a more full, honest portrayal of black motherhood, beyond the stereotype.

A discussion of motherhood in contemporary black literature would be incomplete without analyzing the instances in which mothers really do fail—instances in which their decisions as human beings lead to their failure as mothers. The “mother” characters are not always empowered, do not always make the choices we, the readers, hope they would make, and indeed often fall short of performing their motherly duties. When Charlton speaks of being seen as both “a mother and fully human at once” (184), she is talking about the importance of recognizing black mothers as multidimensional human beings—not seeing them as stereotypically bad, but also not moving the opposite direction and expecting perfection. Ultimately, it is about recognizing the humanity of these women, which requires an understanding of their failures. Highlighting the decision of authors to create imperfect mothers serves to illustrate the depth and complexity of the “mother” characters these authors are creating—characters who are defined by their roles as mothers, but also by their roles as flawed, imperfect human beings. Examples are everywhere, from Jesmyn Ward’s Sing, Unburied, Sing, in which the mother of the main character is a drug addict, to Ayana Mathis’s The Twelve Tribes of Hattie, in which the mother, Hattie, runs away with her youngest child, leaving the rest of her children at home (73). The act of writing produces power, as Tracy K. Smith has stated, and the act of writing about failure is empowering because by embracing failure and claiming and exploring the whole story of what it means to be a black mother in America, humanity is reclaimed. Although their stories are painful and difficult, when these characters are fleshed out, made multidimensional and more than just their failures, their inclusion becomes a powerful tool for creating truth through fiction.

In her 2017 novel Sing, Unburied, Sing, Ward creates a mother who fails but who is humanized. Ward humanizes her by using different characters to narrate the story, and by providing readers with context to understand the causes and broader contexts of the mother’s failure. At first, the novel’s young protagonist, Jojo, introduces his mother, reminiscing about “when there was more good than bad, when she’d push me on the swing Pop hung from one of the pecan trees in the front yard...Before she was more gone than here. Before she started snorting crushed pills” (7). Indeed, Jojo describes his hurt when, for his thirteenth birthday, Leonie brings home a small, “baby shower cake,” saying, “They didn’t have no more birthday cakes. The shoes is blue, so it fits” (27). Narrating this scene, Jojo tells us, “I laugh but don’t feel nothing warm, no joy in me when I do it” (27). Later, Leonie reflects on this scene as well, remarking, “Jojo’s face stuck with me because I could tell he secretly thought I was going to surprise him with a gift, something else besides that hasty cake, some thing that wouldn’t be gone in three days” (33). Completely aware that she has disappointed her son, she turns back to drugs, stating “A clean burn shot through my bones, and then I forgot. The shoes I didn’t buy, the melted cake” (33). In this instance, readers see Leonie as more than just the failure of a mother disappointing Jojo. Her recognition of her failings and her attempts to dull the pain she feels as a result help to humanize her. While never excusing her behavior, Ward resists playing into stereotypes and painting Leonie as “Jojo’s mother,” a one-dimensional
failure. Instead, Ward gives Jojo’s mother, Leonie, her own voice. As we see Leonie’s thoughts and recognize the ways in which she tries to mother despite her addiction and extreme imperfections, we are able to acknowledge that she is more than her mistakes. By giving Leonie a voice in the novel, Ward acquaints us with her past—the grief she is running from. Leonie’s detachment from her children and her misplaced efforts to heal her young daughter take on a new light when Ward shows us how Leonie lost her own brother to racially-motivated violence and was haunted by his memory, both literally and figuratively. By allowing both Jojo and Leonie to narrate the same situations, Ward allows readers to witness the hurt they both feel. Without excusing Leonie’s failings, Ward depicts her as “fully human” (Charlton 182).

This same theme is played out in various ways in other novels. In Jacqueline Woodson’s Another Brooklyn, a mother haunted by mental illness is never fully introduced, but her absence is keenly felt, and the details we are given help to humanize her despite her inability to mother in the way the main character desires. “I thought of my mother often,” the narrator tells us, “lifting my hand to stroke my own cheek, imagining her beside me...when my brother cried, I shushed him, telling him not to worry. She’s coming soon, I said, trying to echo her. She’s coming tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” (Woodson 18). Desire for an absent mother is also expressed in the last chapter of The Twelve Tribes of Hattie, which focuses on Sala, Hattie’s granddaughter. As in Woodson’s novel, Sala’s mother is institutionalized, and the child left behind feels betrayed by her other family members. Sitting in church, reflecting on her mother’s absence, “Sala felt a stab of mother-want so strong it winded her” (Mathis 241). It is this “mother-want,” this absence, which motivates Sala to step forward, choosing to answer the preacher’s call and “become a child of God” so that “all of those women would be her mothers in Christ” (241). “Mother-want” is a theme commonly explored in these novels, and though it is most often explored when mothers are absent, it is also explored when mothers are unwilling or unable to fully mother—when their imperfection as humans stops them from protecting or providing for their children.

A poignant example of this type of imperfect motherhood is found in the peripheral storyline of The Hate U Give. Although the main character’s mother is very supportive, her friend and her half-brother, Kenya and Seven, share a mother who is unwilling or unable to leave her abusive partner (Thomas 366). In an argument with his mother about her failings, Seven says, “All you’ve done for me? What? Putting me out the house? Choosing a man over me every single chance you got? Remember when I tried to stop King from whooping your ass, Iesha? Who did you get mad at?” (364). For much of the novel, Thomas depicts a woman in a desperate situation whose ability to mother well is hindered by her decisions. Ultimately, however, she sacrifices her own well-being to protect her children, demonstrating the immense cost of mothering. Risking her own safety, Iesha provides a way for the children to escape. Though she is unable to vocalize her love for them, it is made apparent through her actions, something that Thomas points out through Starr, the narrator, who mentions that as they are struggling to get away to safety, Starr looks back. “I doubt that she can see me,” Starr says of Iesha, “but I don’t think I’m one of the people she’s trying to see anyway. They’ve gone to the car” (385). Despite her previous failings as a mother, in this crucial moment, Iesha chooses to put her children’s safety before her own. Her son, Seven, struggles to see this action as one motivated by love until it is pointed out to him that, with the children gone, “who do you think he’s [the abusive partner] gon’ [sic] take it out on?” (386). The fact that it
takes others pointing out to him the motives of his mother's actions further illustrates the cost of motherhood and the ways in which sacrifices made by mothers, especially those mothers who have historically failed to provide for or protect their children, can be misinterpreted. Iesha serves as yet another example of a mother who fails repeatedly, but who is still humanized and who, ultimately, does what she can in order to protect her children at great personal cost.

The idea of the cost of motherhood is also explored in Ordinary Light. Smith discusses feeling increasingly distanced from her mother as she attempts to grow into adulthood and leave behind the parts of her mother's teaching that no longer suit her, the stage which she sees as the “beginning of [her] life as someone other than [her] mother's child” (277). Smith describes feeling that her mother is unsure around her, saying that she “looked at me from a different kind of distance, as though I’d gone feral and she was afraid I'd threaten her with my teeth if she got too close” (258). This distance closes as Smith recognizes that, despite her mother’s imperfections, she is dedicated to doing what she feels is best for her daughter. Part of this realization comes for Smith as she sees her mother, this woman of quiet strength, struggle through battling cancer. Indeed, Smith's understanding of her mother grows as her mother gets sick and especially after she passes away, deepening Smith’s vision of who her mother was. The strength she has previously associated with her mother is tempered in an emotional scene, when Smith learns of her mother’s cancer diagnosis. “She wanted to be strong. She wanted to stand on faith…but I could tell she was afraid by the way she steadied herself with both hands against the countertop and smiled an almost apologetic smile” (226-27). It is in the scenes that take place after this one, near the very end of the book, in which Smith comes to see her mother as “a mother and fully human at once” (Charlton 184). She also comes to recognize the cost of motherhood. At the memorial service for her mother, Smith recognizes how little she really knows about her mother’s life outside of her role as a mother, causing Smith to reflect, “How many more lives would we find, if we only knew how to seek them, within the life we recognized as hers?” (325). Because of the way Smith has structured her book, readers are first able to see her mother as a “good mother,” someone who cares for her children and defies negative stereotypes of black motherhood, and then readers are able to see Smith's mother as “fully human,” showing how her role as a black mother shapes, but does not wholly define, her life. In addition, this idea that Smith's mother has “many more lives” but also that she has, to some degree, sacrificed them for her children, speaks to the sacrifice made by black mothers on behalf of their children—a sacrifice often taken for granted and seldom noticed.

In addition to giving readers an opportunity to examine, question, and re-evaluate the ideas and stereotypes they have been taught and have internalized, literature that highlights the experience of black mothers allows black women to create an image of black motherhood for themselves, an extremely empowering act. This idea is supported by Andrea O’Reilly, a scholar whose work focuses on black mothering. She explains that, “the African American tradition of motherhood centers upon the recognition that mothering, in its concern with the physical and psychological well-being of children and its focus on the empowerment of children, has historical and political importance, value and prominence and that motherhood, as a consequence, is a site of power for Black women” (100). Supporting the idea that motherhood can be “a site of power for Black women” (100), these texts go beyond simply challenging stereotypes, and instead offer new perspectives with which to view black motherhood—perspectives that emphasize
empowerment. Through these stories, mothers are shown experiencing heartbreak, finding empowerment, overcoming obstacles, suffering defeat, and triumphing over oppression. These stories reveal a rich complexity all too often missing from depictions of black mothers created by white authors. As black writers, especially black women writers, develop complex and multi-dimensional characters who are black and who mother, they perform the difficult yet extremely important work of challenging the myth of the “bad black mother” while still allowing for faults and imperfections. They do far more than simply refute the myth as they depict the good, the bad, and the ugly realities of battling race and gender bias in American society. These authors strive to break free of the “bad black mother” myth through their writing, “disrupting the very notion of illegitimate motherhood and the harm it does” (Charlton 182). It is in these stories, and in the writing of these stories, that black women respond in a powerful and empowering way to the stereotypes that have been cast on black motherhood. The power they create remains even after the book is closed, and that power can be seen in political movements such as Black Lives Matter and in subtler but also important contributions by black women working to improve their children’s futures.

Mothering in Life

In a 2016 anthology dedicated to “Trayvon Martin and the many other black men, women, and children who have died and been denied justice for these last four hundred years,” an essay by Claudia Rankine explores the ways in which black mothers, past and present, deal with the loss of their children to violence sparked by institutionalized racism (Ward, Fire This Time). She says of a black mother today that “whenever her son steps out of their home, her status as the mother of a living human being remains as precarious as ever” (145) because she continues to “live in a country where...dead blacks are a part of normal life” (147). This leads Rankine to her conclusion which is also the title of her essay: “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.” If the condition of black life is one of mourning, then the condition of black motherhood must certainly be, at least at times, a condition of pain and suffering. This pain and suffering come to mothers as they mourn over the bodies of their slain babies, boys and girls of no more than seventeen, the age Trayvon Martin was when he was killed, or fourteen, the age Emmett Till was when he was killed.

Rankine not only examines the pain felt by mothers whose children have been brutally murdered, however, for she also looks at black women who are mothering beyond the sphere of the home—mothering a movement and revolutionizing the role of black motherhood once more. Specifically, Rankine highlights the work of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the founders of Black Lives Matter (149). She defines the Black Lives Matter movement as “an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives” (151). This move to centralize mourning in order to raise awareness and promote change builds on the decision made by Mamie Till Bradley over sixty years ago to leave her murdered son’s casket open as a testament to the violence committed against his young, innocent, black body. Rankine refers to the decision of Bradley, but she also looks at decisions made by mothers of murdered black boys since, asking, “How must it feel to a family member for the deceased to be more important as evidence than as an individual to be buried and laid to rest?” (152). For mothers like Lesley McSpadden
(mother of Michael Brown) and Samaria Rice (mother of Tamir Rice), agency is denied. It is not their decision to open or close the casket, so to speak, for “regardless of the wishes of these mothers” (154), after their children were murdered, their names and faces were “commoditized and assimilated into our modes of capitalism” (153), their children’s deaths remaining “within the public discourse” (154). Such disregard for the mothers of these murdered children replicates the violence against the children’s innocent black bodies by removing autonomy and denying agency once more. In violating both the families and the victims’ rights to privacy, the discussion surrounding the death of black children suggests that these children’s bodies and lives, as well as the lives of their mothers and families, are not viewed as their own, but as public, “regardless of their wishes” (154).

In 2018, black motherhood in America is defined by black women themselves in terms of progress toward the ideal as well as the distance still left to travel to get there—by rejoicing and mourning. As black women represent themselves as mothers on stage, online, in music, and in writing, and as they create fictitious representations of black motherhood that are as deep and varied as the women themselves, we begin to see Tope Fadiran Charlton’s dream materialize—black mothers are seen, at least for a moment, as “mother[s] and fully human at once” (184), regardless of poverty level or marital status. This dream is still far from being reality, but through art we see what it might look like, and it is that vision that enables action. As Tracy K. Smith states, “when we tell our stories, we make power” (278). For Smith, telling her own story “is both a prayer for power and the answer to that prayer” (279), suggesting that empowerment for black mothers comes not only from mothering itself, but also from “writ[ing] one’s own history” and therefore claiming power (Wallace xxi). As we value depictions of empowered, imperfect, and honest black motherhood over caricatures and stereotypes, we see the “power” that black women have made for themselves, as mothers and as people. In turn, these depictions provide the power necessary to fight for change in a world that has long devalued black women’s voices, delegitimized their role as mothers, and oppressed them and their children. This fight for change is being led by women—mothers—who recognize their power, thanks in large part to those who have come forward and “told their stories,” and by so doing, have created and shared power, so that someday, black women will be seen as “mother[s] and fully human at once” (184).

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