

Rilley McKenna

Dr. Kristin Matthews

1 March 2018

Empowered Motherhood in Tracy K. Smith's *Ordinary Light*

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 societal expectations as a black mother, instead showing the world her humanity. Since the time they were enslaved, black mothers in America have endured the burdens of stereotype and misconception. In addition to the challenging nature of raising their children, black mothers are also faced with overcoming a host of harmful stereotypes that attempt to erase their identity and lump them into one homogenous category. Despite emancipation and gaining “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.

In spite of these challenges, both real and fictional black mothers refuse to remain confined by stereotypes. Depictions of black motherhood 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.” Complicating overly simplified ideas about race and motherhood, depictions of this nature spark conversations about who is considered “motherly” enough to mother, and why.

Speaking of the difficulty inherent to 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...[something] 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 faces as a black woman, to be considered a “good mother,” but she moves past that, speaking 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. Her 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 is doing today.

I contend that by examining representations of black mothers found in fiction, non-fiction and popular culture, we complicate the rhetoric and ideas surrounding black motherhood, discover the complexity and diversity of experience for black mothers in America, and determine the ways in which black mothers empower their children and recognize their own power and strength. Ultimately, we are able to glimpse Charlton’s dream of black mothers being viewed as “fully human” (184). This is specifically evident throughout Tracy K. Smith’s depiction of her mother and her perspective as a mother in her memoir *Ordinary Light*. By examining what empowered black motherhood looks like in Smith’s life, we will come to better understand how depictions of empowered motherhood can change the stereotypes and ideas about black mothers in America today.

The prejudice against, discrimination of, and stereotypes applied to black mothers in America can be traced back to their historical beginnings. In “‘Us Colored Women Had to Go through a Plenty’: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women,” Thelma Jennings writes of the horrors faced by enslaved women, and specifically, by enslaved mothers. Often, enslaved women were controlled by slaveholders 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). Often, mothers were separated from their children, as in a 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 horrific treatment of enslaved mothers and the lack of respect for or recognition of enslaved women’s motherhood as legitimate or equal to that of 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. Motherhood was seen by some enslaved women as a triumph—a way to assert some degree of autonomy, control, and normalcy into their lives (Jennings). By other enslaved women, however, motherhood was seen as a way to be controlled in the future, as threats of harm coming to children or mothers being separated from children were often used to control enslaved mothers (Washington 188).

Although slavery was abolished in 1865, the dehumanizing ideas held by whites about black motherhood did not disappear. Instead of recognizing the role slavery played in destroying black families, white anthropologists, social workers, and health care professionals made various claims about the fitness of black mothers based on biased perceptions and little else (Bennett, “Good White People”). Representation of poverty in the United States shifted from focusing on white people to focusing on people of color. “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). Black mothers, specifically, were blamed for poverty in the infamous Moynihan report, published during the Civil Rights Era 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. By casting black mothers in such an unflattering and downright harmful light, white politicians were able to scare voters into supporting their policies. Both the perceptions left behind by these political attacks against black women as well as the policies themselves have since negatively affected black mothers and their families in American society.

In light of such a 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. 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. By including negative and positive traits and creating characters who refuse to fit into a box, 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.

One way in which black women claim ownership of their experience as mothers and as daughters of black mothers is through memoir. 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). 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. In the memoir, it is clear that her relationship with her mother is complex and multi-faceted. 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. She does far more than simply refute the stereotype of the "welfare queen," instead bringing to life a powerful and strong, yet flawed and beautifully human example of her black mother, who combated the difficulties of being black in America and of raising black children in America, overcoming challenges with quiet strength and imperfect dignity even while succumbing to the cancer that wracked her body.

Smith credits her mother with making their home into a safe, comfortable space, demonstrating the ways in which, for her, black motherhood means crafting a safe space for

children as they prepare to face a world which will 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 sacrificing, 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 been too often absent from portrayals of black motherhood, and that is revealed in a wonderful way in Smith's writing. Although she speaks of her mother's love, Smith also discusses the distance that develops between them as she attempts to grow into adulthood and leave behind the parts of her mother's teaching that no longer suit her, during the stage Smith 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 she gets sick and especially after she has passed 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). 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, sparking her to ask, "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 come to see her mother as a "good mother," someone who cares for her children and defies negative stereotypes of black motherhood, and then later, 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 2018, black motherhood in America is defined both by progress and a lack of progress, by both rejoicing and mourning. As black women represent themselves as mothers on stage, online, in music, and in writing--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 off in the

distance in reality, but through art, we see what it might look like. 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). By valuing 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. We honor that power by standing back and listening, as they tell us what it really means to be a black mother in America today.