“IS THIS WHAT MOTHERHOOD IS?”: AMBIVALENT REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD IN BLACK WOMEN’S NOVELS, 1953-2011

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*Maud Martha* (Gwendolyn Brooks): *MM*

*Report from Part One* (Gwendolyn Brooks): *RPO*

*Report from Part Two* (Gwendolyn Brooks): *RPT*

*The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison): *TBE*

*Salvage the Bones* (Jesmyn Ward): *STB*

*Men We Reaped* (Jesmyn Ward): *MWR*
ABSTRACT

This project analyzes three novels written by African-American women that include ambivalent representations of motherhood: Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* (1953), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011). Diverging from the image of the strong black mother that frequently appears in black women’s writing, these novels contain women whose mothering experiences are hardly empowering; instead, they find the expectations of domesticity or self-sacrifice placed on them to be burdensome and confining. Rather than pathologizing black mothers, these texts’ ambivalent representations of motherhood expose societal limitations placed on black mothers, both in terms of the sexist narratives that confine black women to motherhood alone and the racist structures that obstruct the motherwork they perform. As these texts span a sixty-year time period, this thesis also seeks to demonstrate how the racist and sexist oppression black mothers face has transformed in relation to political, social, and economic trends over the past sixty years. Accordingly, it makes room for a more diverse range of mothering experiences in the black women’s literary tradition and argues that conversations about black women’s unique hardships remain just as pressing as they were sixty years ago.
INTRODUCTION
Contested Motherhoods

Black women authors and scholars alike have envisioned motherhood as a source of validation within African-American communities and resistance to the various injustices inflicted upon them. These representations position motherhood as a function of community building, both in the literal sense that black mothers undertake the “motherwork” that fortifies their families and communities and in the figurative sense that black women writers, generation by generation, mother a body of literature that provides space for black women’s voices and texts.¹ For instance, in their efforts to piece together and further cultivate a black women’s literary tradition, black women writers and critics of the 1970s worked to reclaim the forgotten motherwork of past generations that allowed them to produce their own work, as well as to inscribe artistic creation, an inherently maternal undertaking, as a liberating act for African-American families and communities. Published in 1974, Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” maps the inextricability of motherhood and a black women’s literary tradition via her heritage, as she envisions her mother’s and grandmothers’ art as the stimulus for her own creative processes. Venerating how black women have made art out of meager resources in the midst of oppressive circumstances, Walker writes, “[A]ll the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to

¹ Patricia Hill Collins coins the term “motherwork” in “Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood.” She defines it as labor that “goes beyond ensuring the survival of one’s own biological children or those of one’s family. This type of motherwork recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity” (“Shifting” 46-47).
erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are” (1298). Just five years later, Audre Lorde penned “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response,” an essay she would later include in her collection *Sister Outsider* (1984), which renders motherhood a necessary and potentially revolutionary role within black families. Just as Walker turns to the generations of mothers before her to position motherhood as a source of her own self-definition, Lorde casts an eye to the future, conceptualizing her own mothering as a source of self-definition for her children amidst the injustices they encounter. As she recollects the particular hardships of raising her children, and particularly her son, alongside her lesbian partner, she writes, “Raising Black children – female and male – in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. . . . This is what mothers teach – love, survival – that is, self-definition and letting go” (74).

These canonical texts align with a tradition of strong black mothers in black women’s writing. In the introduction to *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and About Black Women*, Mary Helen Washington suggests that resilient and sacrificial mothers abound in black women’s writing:

Looking over the stories that black women have written about their mothers and grandmothers, I am impressed with the frequency of this image: the powerful black mother. Black writers depict the black mother as a woman faced with harsh responsibilities which she accepts and carries out to the fullest of her powers. Of course, this is history. Black women have seen their mothers and aunts and grandmothers taking care of their families under the most severe circumstances. (xxi)
For Washington, black women’s strength and power find their roots in historical eras which necessitated time and again that these women protect and nurture their families in dire circumstances, and their texts display the strength their oppressive environments necessitated. Lauri Umanksy’s critical analysis of motherhood within evolving feminist discourse of the 1960s further emphasizes the significance of these images for black women. Also considering how the influence of black mothers within African-American communities has spanned centuries, Umansky dubs mothers “the unsung heroes of black America” and writes, “For many black women writers, the reclaimed mother served as a strong basis for an affirmative feminist theory” (88). Not only does motherhood span black women’s texts, but it also comprises a tenet of the black feminist conversations that arose in the 1960s and 1970s. As black women created their own uniquely black feminist rhetoric, motherhood served as a collective experience shared by black women across generations that fueled their calls for liberation for themselves and their families and communities. In this manner, black motherhood became and remains inextricably linked with the project of freedom for African-American communities.

Yet, not all texts within the black women’s literary tradition represent motherhood so favorably. Even as she regards the “invincible” and “larger-than-life” black mother a ubiquitous presence in black women’s writing (Black-Eyed Susans xxi), Washington uses the character of Eva Peace from Toni Morrison’s Sula to suggest that this stereotype of black women often masks the more discouraging aspects of their lives. In doing so, she anticipates what will be the focus of this thesis: the constraints on black women’s lives that preclude their strength. Rather than lauding black mothers’ strength, I will critique the cycles of oppression that demand these women’s self-sacrifice. Each chapter will
analyze a novel written by an African-American woman that depicts motherhood in an ambivalent manner. The first, Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha*, published in 1953, represents the protagonist’s mother as a nuisance and subsequently excludes Maud’s relationship with her own daughter—all despite the novel’s general confinement within the female sphere of domesticity. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, charts the year that Pecola Breedlove becomes impregnated by her father and births the child too early, all the while she interacts with various women—a number of potential maternal figures in the midst of her own mother’s disengagement—that mostly fail to mother her. Published in 2011, Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* chronicles a young girl’s discovery of her pregnancy as her family prepares for the incoming Hurricane Katrina, and her attempt to make sense of the news unearths her grief concerning the death of her own mother. By and large, these narratives complicate the glorification of black motherhood by questioning whether it might also be burdensome, inadequate to resist the injustices against black communities, or even irrelevant altogether.

This thesis argues that Brooks, Morrison, and Ward utilize motherhood as a vehicle to express the particular burdens black women and their communities experience. In other words, instead of reading these women as failed mothers, this thesis will propose that *Maud Martha, The Bluest Eye,* and *Salvage the Bones* engage dominant cultural and political narratives so as to emphasize the failures of these narratives to encompass black women’s experiences. The historical contexts that produce each text are particularly important for this argument because they reveal how the forms of racial oppression have transformed over time, as have the relationships black women hold to these injustices.

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2 All three novels are set in an earlier decade than that of their publication, but I assume that each text engages the trends of the time period during which it was written.
Nonetheless, black motherhood repeatedly figures as a means to uncover and accentuate the various iterations of systemic racism. These texts’ ambivalence, then, reflects less on the role of motherhood itself and more so on how systemic oppression complicates how these women execute their roles, as well as their relationships to those—the children and communities—they mother.

At the same time that this thesis examines how particular injustices of a given time period inform how women understand their mothering, the conclusion to each chapter will seek to locate moments in the novels that offer a more constructive model of motherhood. Though these moments are scarce among the three novels, each imagines as possible a model of motherhood in which women can redefine themselves within or beyond the role of mother. Of course, these models are merely that: models that envision how motherhood might empower rather than confine women when the women themselves possess the capability to define their own narratives. The chapter on *Salvage the Bones* concludes the thesis with the moment that Esch Batiste first claims her role as mother with some authority. While I will argue that the harsh realities of Esch’s life have necessitated that she perform the duties of motherhood long before she calls herself a mother, the fact remains that Esch’s assertion of her role as a strong mother is born out of the hardships she has survived. Accordingly, rather than reasserting the image of the strong black mother, this thesis will show how narratives of black motherhood must encompass women’s strengths and weaknesses, their indomitable spirit and their crushing grief, as a result of the circumstances that produce it.

This thesis will largely rely on a black feminist criticism that began to develop in the 1960s and 1970s. As Umansky has noted, motherhood serves as an impetus for black
feminist criticism, as the conceived strength of black mothers fuels their demands for equality and liberation not only for their families and communities, but also for themselves. However, various scholars of black feminism also emphasize how motherhood as an ideal discounts a variety of other mothering experiences within black communities. In *Black-Eyed Susans*, Washington discourages the unanimity of texts by black women, suggesting instead that these women write stories that span a range of experiences so that such stories might kill the “sacred cow” of black women’s invulnerability (xxxii):

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been—alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experiences of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. (xxxii)

Some fifteen years later, around the time that the term “intersectionality” emerges in black feminist theory, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women should have the space to articulate their own mothering experiences and anticipates the breadth of such narratives. While she offers some trends of black motherhood, her often-cited article “Black Women and Motherhood” negates an “essentialist’ Black women’s standpoint” and argues instead that “a better use of these themes views them as culturally specific, resilient lifelines that can be continually refashioned in response to changing contexts”
(Black Feminist Thought 177). In other words, narratives about motherhood should attend to a variety of factors, such as a woman’s socioeconomic status and geographic location, that inform how a woman understands and experiences her role. In the manner that a black feminist criticism rejects stereotypes and strives to encompass a wide scope of black women’s experiences, this thesis works to reveal the complexities of the stereotype of the indomitable black mother and make room for those women whose mothering experiences expand normative definitions of black motherhood and womanhood.

In seeking a wider variety of black mothering narratives, I have found that mothering within black communities is often a locus of contradictions, as motherhood simultaneously exposes these women’s strength and shortcomings and both empowers and confines them. Collins writes,

Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a basis for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism. These alleged contradictions can exist side by side in African-American communities and families and even within individual women. (Black Feminist Thought 176-77)

The mothers in Maud Martha, The Bluest Eye, and Salvage the Bones find the domestic duties of motherhood restricting or find themselves restricted from mothering because they are not “domestic” enough. They find that others exploit their strength or feel that they lack the strength to mother in the face of the racism and poverty that plague their families. They lose their children or find that they lose themselves within their obligations to their children. Some seek a release from the expectations placed on them as
mothers, while others find their reason for living beyond motherhood. And all of them find that the demands on their lives—whether the sexist narratives that confine them within motherhood or the racist structures that render their motherwork powerless—limit how they control their mothering. Accordingly, I will argue that these myriad representations of motherhood, in their common thread of ambivalence, expose the systemic oppression that disallows any sort of ideal motherhood within these women’s lives.

Finally, I will read narratives of black women’s mothering experiences over the past sixty years in order to show how the oppression they have faced varies from decade to decade. Just as Collins suggests that black women at any given time experience motherhood in a variety of ways, Hazel V. Carby suggests that a black feminist criticism must be “ahistorical” so as to account for the contradictions among and differences between black women’s experiences at different junctures in history (Carby 10). In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, she writes, “[R]acisms and sexisms need to be regarded as particular historical practices articulated with each other and with other practices in a social formation” (18). I consider the political, social, and economic trends of each time period to pinpoint the particular expectations placed on black mothers at that time. Even as ambivalent portrayals of black motherhood unite these novels of disparate eras, the analysis of each novel will shed light on how this ambivalence derives from the particular injustices black women faced during the given time period. Accordingly, I will track how the pressures black mothers face have shifted from the more overt racist ideologies of the Jim Crow era to the more covert
expectations placed upon them by their own communities in our supposed post-racial society.

I engage a variety of texts to evidence my arguments about black motherhood. Beyond standard literary analyses, some of these sources include other writings by the selected authors, as these texts—such as memoirs by Brooks and Ward—give insight into how these women conceptualize motherhood in their own lives and thus provide a point of comparison and contrast for the ambivalent renderings of motherhood in their novels. Other texts consist of accounts or critiques of motherhood written during the various watershed moments this thesis will consider. This body of texts, including Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, captures the acute burdens and realities of motherhood during these critical junctures, especially as these texts work in tandem with the selected novels to establish a literature in which black women define motherhood for themselves. Finally, this analysis will engage scholars who have written histories of black women in America as well as American motherhood so as to track how the ambivalences concerning motherhood transform from decade to decade.

The first chapter of the thesis will examine Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* and question why this novel that so heavily centralizes a black woman’s commonplace domestic experiences paints the protagonist’s mother as a participant in the oppression that burdens her family and mostly excludes Maud’s relationship with her daughter. By

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3 Not much has been written in regards to representations of motherhood in *Maud Martha* and *Salvage the Bones*. A number of scholars who performed the initial work of reclaiming forgotten black women’s texts studied *Maud Martha*; these women include Barbara Christian (*Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*), Hortense Spillers (*Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*), and Mary Helen Washington (*Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*). However, Brooks’s only novel has since mostly fallen out of such discussions, as evidenced by the scarcity of scholarly publications written on the novel of late. Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* has garnered some critical attention over the past few years, yet only Mary Ruth Marotte, a scholar of pregnancy in women’s texts, has written on pregnancy/motherhood in Ward’s novel (“Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones”).
engaging sources that detail how societal institutions, including the realm of literary publication, silenced and neglected black women during the 1940s and 1950s, I will argue that as Maud seeks other means for fulfillment in her life—namely through the cultivation of her own voice—the limitations of motherhood and even womanhood deny her the voice that she seeks beyond her home and family. The second chapter will analyze Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, focusing particularly on how it includes a number of maternal figures who either neglect their role or find that others neglect the importance of their role. In the manner that the 1960s and 1970s saw a variety of narratives about motherhood that either misrepresented or overlooked black women, this chapter will argue that Morrison’s ambivalent representations of motherhood exhibit the myriad ways in which these prevailing images fail to encompass black women’s realities while working for the political gains of other groups of people. The final chapter covers Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*, a text that captures Esch Batiste’s struggle to contend with her own pregnancy as she concurrently copes with her repressed grief over her own mother’s death. Via numerous black women’s texts that agonize over the particular burdens of motherhood in an age of normalized and racialized violence, I will argue that Esch’s uneasiness concerning her own pregnancy stems, in part, from her anxiety that she cannot keep her family intact, much as her own mother did, in the face of various iterations of oppression. In each of these chapters, ambivalence serves as the vehicle through which I will question how black women’s subjectivity and relationships with their kinfolk interact with and falter under oppressive systems that belittle them. Just as Esch Batiste laments how motherhood cannot prevent sickness and storms from provoking her family members to mutilate—whether intentionally or unintentionally—
each others’ bodies, this thesis will return time and again to the silences, violence, and neglect that leave these women questioning, “Is this what motherhood is?” (STB 130).
CHAPTER ONE

Motherhood and Black Women’s Subjectivity in *Maud Martha*

Especially if you’re a woman, you have to set yourself aside constantly. Although I did it during my marriage, I couldn’t again. After having had a year of solitude, I realize that this is what is right for me, to be able to control my life.


In both *Report from Part One* (1972) and *Report from Part Two* (1996), Gwendolyn Brooks crafts an image of her mother as a woman of fierce loyalty, commitment, and strength. Each a memoir comprised of vignettes on the author’s life, these works return time and again to the figure of Keziah Corinne Wims Brooks and repeatedly reiterate three main facets of her character. First, Brooks’s memoirs depict Keziah Brooks as the epitome of domesticity, particularly in how they position Keziah as inextricably linked with the concept of “home”: “Home meant a quick-walking, careful, Duty-Loving mother, who played the piano, made fudge, made cocoa and prune whip and apricot pie, drew tidy cows and trees and expert houses with chimneys and chimney smoke, who helped her children with arithmetic homework, and who sang in high soprano” (*RPO* 39). Keziah’s hesitancy to quit her home after contracting an illness, detailed in the second memoir, further conjoins Keziah Brooks with her domestic space. The memoirs also emphasize Keziah’s strength. For instance, as Brooks considers the illness that eventually led to her mother’s death, she positions the sickness as inconsistent with her mother’s character; she writes, “She ate less and less. Soon, she Wasn’t Well. That is the way to put it. Yes, she was eighty-nine, but for Keziah Wims Brooks to be Not Well was strange” (*RPT* 26). That her mother’s decline conflicted with her inherent strength fashions Brooks’s notion of her mother as unshakeable and constant. Finally,
Brooks’s memoirs repeatedly suggest that Keziah worked to foster her daughter’s creative voice by facilitating her writing. *Part One* chronicles how Keziah bought her children a multitude of books and cultivated an appreciation of the arts in their home, while *Part Two* recounts how Keziah praised her daughter’s writing to anyone she could, including Langston Hughes. “You’re going to be the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar,” Brooks remembers her mother saying (RPT 11). For Brooks, domesticity, strength, and creative expression coalesce in the figure of her mother, who is a mainstay in Brooks’s texts and life. As Brooks recounts her mother’s death, she writes, “I lost and shall never lose my Mother” (RPT 29).

Brooks’s first and only novel, *Maud Martha*, published in 1953, anticipates the form of her later memoirs in its representation of the protagonist’s life from childhood to adulthood by way of a series of short vignettes. These vignettes offer readers glimpses of Maud Martha’s relationships—her family ties, her engagement and marriage to Paul Phillips, and the birth of her daughter—as well as her interactions with those around her—her neighbors, various shopkeepers, and the assorted animals that enter her home as either intruders or foodstuff. Moreover, Brooks identifies *Maud Martha* as semi-autobiographical, saying, “[M]uch in the ‘story’ was taken out of my own life, and twisted, highlighted or dulled, dressed up or down” (*RPO* 191). The novel even emerged two years after the birth of Brooks’s second child, thus establishing a resemblance between the novel’s account of Maud’s nascent role as mother and the author’s simultaneous immersion within the same role. Nonetheless, despite the similarities

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4 In lieu of a plot synopsis—for the novel hardly contains a typical chronological plot—I defer to Hortense Spillers: “The stage of action in *Maud Martha* is embedded in none other than the landscape of its central consciousness, and from this focal point—replete with particular biases and allegiances—we come to know the ‘world’ of the narrative” (*Black, White, and in Color* 142-43).
between Brooks’s novel and her autobiographical accounts, *Maud Martha* refrains from representing motherhood as favorably as Brooks’s memoirs. In stark contrast to her memoirs, *Maud Martha* decreasingly features the protagonist’s relationships with, first, her mother, and second, her daughter, and when the text does consider Maud’s identity as daughter or mother, these roles hardly invigorate her. This chapter will examine the sparse representations of motherhood in Brooks’s novel and question why, in light of the author’s own views on motherhood, the text displays it in such an ambivalent manner.

An analysis of motherhood in the novel must contend with the layers of “mothering” in the text, as Maud’s dissatisfying relationships with her mother and daughter allow Brooks to cultivate, or “mother,” a literary tradition that makes room for more nuanced images of motherhood and womanhood in black women’s stories. First, in the manner that Alice Walker envisions generations of mothers making art within their meager circumstances, *Maud Martha* represents Brooks’s mothering of a literary tradition that both confronts and imagines stories beyond the traditional limitations on black women that largely rendered their lives invisible. Numerous scholars of Brooks’s novel consider how it engaged with and resisted literary trends at the time of its publication. In *Writing through Jane Crow: Race and Gender Politics in African American Literature*, Ayesha K. Hardison criticizes how scholars of African-American literature have primarily devoted their attention to the black male writers of the 1940s and 1950s, as they effectively exclude black women of the same era from the status they deserve within a black literary tradition (3). On a similar thread, Mary Helen Washington discloses how critical reviews of *Maud Martha* were “condescending and dismissive”

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5 For a thorough analysis of the multiple layers of the narration of the novel beyond just motherhood, see Megan Ahern’s “Creative Multivalence: Social Engagement beyond Naturalism in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha*.”
(Invented Lives xvi), as they reflected societal unease at Brooks’s venture outside the
domestic sphere. Arguing that black women have always held a prominent, albeit
overlooked, role in the project of freedom for black communities, Washington writes,
“What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of
power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly
white but some black. Women are the disinherited” (Invented Lives xvii-xviii).
Accordingly, in the manner that her story focalizes the “disinherited,” Brooks’s novel can
be said to participate in the “mothering” of a distinctly black women’s literature that
works to integrate the unique hardships of black women into conversations about racism.

At the same time that Brooks gained prominence in the literary realm, even
despite the prevailing androcentric literary canon, her protagonist attempts to birth and
hone her own voice in response to her circumscribing circumstances. The idea that Maud
Martha seeks a voice within and beyond her domestic domain is not new, so this facet of
my analysis will largely rely on others’ readings of the novel. As they try to pinpoint
precisely how Maud interacts with her world, scholars have envisioned Maud as an artist
and/or intellectual who attempts to fashion herself apart from the surrounding schemas
that would confine her. In her article on the silences—both Brooks’s and Maud’s—within
the novel, Washington suggests that Maud possesses the capacity of an artist who
perceives and engages the complexity of the world: “Maud’s gifts are words, insight,
imagination. She has the artist’s eye, the writer’s memory, that unsparing honesty which
does not put a light gauze across little miseries and monotonies but exposes them, leaving
the audience as ungauzed as the creator” (“Taming” 458). While Washington reads
Maud’s discernment as a sign of her artistry, Hardison utilizes these same characteristics
to signify Maud’s intellect. Hardison’s chapter on *Maud Martha* analyzes the various readings—both literal and figurative—that Maud performs, which leads her to posit, “[C]ritical reading is imperative for black women’s self-authorized construction of subjectivity in *Maud Martha*” (146). Both critics also examine how Maud does not fully achieve the part of artist or intellectual. Washington notes how Maud’s limiting environment prevents her from claiming her artistry, while Hardison expounds upon the varying degrees of success Maud finds as a critical reader. No matter how we categorize Maud, the fact remains that she repeatedly seeks expression that both responds to and transcends the restraints of her domestic sphere.  

That is, while the text hardly details her mothering of her child, it does detail her attempts, though often obstructed, to birth an identity for herself beyond her family and home.

Herein lies Maud’s and the text’s ambivalence towards motherhood: the expectations surrounding motherhood that render it a pillar of a system that restricts women’s voices beyond the domestic sphere. In her apathetic acceptance of the hegemonic ideologies that neglect herself and her daughter, Belva Brown, Maud’s mother, embodies the very systems that oppress her family, thus requiring Maud to cut the cord uniting her and her mother in order to develop any sort of self-understanding. That is, while Brooks herself had a mother who fostered a nurturing home and encouraged her creative expression, Maud has no such thing, so Keziah Brooks is an anomaly during a time period that mostly denied women any self-identity beyond their

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6 Brooks’s earlier poem entitled “kitchenette building,” published in the collection *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), anticipates the tension between Maud’s ruminations and her mundane domestic life.  
7 About this same point, Washington offers a poignant statement: “It is natural to wonder why Brooks, in her ‘autobiographical novel,’ did not allow Maud the same independence and creative expression that she herself had as a writer” (“Taming” 458-59).
status as housewife. Later in the novel, Maud births a daughter, yet Brooks’s selected vignettes seem to position Maud’s role as mother as insignificant to her identity. While we can imagine that Maud still interacts with her daughter in the blank spaces of the novel, Maud’s pursuit of an identity elsewhere—an endeavor often undercut by others’ expectations for her life—is crucial in its search for a more comprehensive expression of black womanhood. In Maud’s lack of fulfillment in her domestic relationships and stunted expression beyond the domestic sphere, Brooks literalizes the silencing of black women during the time period that produced her novel and exposes the facets of domesticity that enforce that silencing. Accordingly, Brooks enacts these fraught mother-daughter relationships in her novel so as to challenge the systems that attempt to silence black women, including herself, who fail to adhere to their prescribed roles.

**Maud Martha and Belva**

In *Invented Lives*, Washington recounts an article in the *Negro Digest* written after Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950, as this article took pains to imply that the author had no place publishing her writing. The article told of the frustration of Brooks’s husband and son at her chosen occupation and of her shock that she could win such a prestigious award. Washington writes, “The entire article was an act of sabotage, situating Brooks in a domestic milieu where her ‘proper’ role as wife and mother could be asserted and her role as serious artist—a role this reporter obviously found too threatening to even consider—could be undercut” (xv). The irony of the situation lies not only in this blatant mistreatment of a Pulitzer Prize winner, but also in its attempted silencing of a woman whose writing strives to make room for black women’s voices beyond the domestic sphere. In other words, Brooks sought to mother a
more comprehensive literature for and about black women, while her role as housewife and its associated duties threatened to restrict her access to a domain that largely favored men. We know from Brooks’s prolific career that any obstacles she faced did not thwart her success, yet the protagonist of her only novel does not share this victory. While Maud seeks to know herself and her place in the world—to birth and nurture her own voice—her mother repeatedly stifles her nascent voice by inscribing her within her “rightful” domestic position which does not allow for such liberties. Accordingly, Belva’s assimilation into and enforcement of normative ideologies of “proper femininity” epitomize how the stifling of black women’s voices in the mid-twentieth century was rooted in sexist and racist narratives that failed to attend to black women’s realities.

Throughout the novel, Belva Brown perpetuates the societal neglect of her daughter that is part and parcel of hegemonic society, in so doing alienating Maud and stymying her “unfeminine” curiosity. During Maud’s childhood, Belva’s perpetuation of Maud’s invisibility takes the form of her acceptance of a worldview that relegates how the entire family interacts with Maud. From the novel’s opening chapter, Maud understands that Helen, her sister, has something that she does not have, and her father, mother, and brother accordingly treat the sisters differently. Brooks describes how Maud’s brother Harry holds doors open for Helen, only to “calmly let them slam in her, Maud Martha’s, his friend’s, face” (MM 36), and how Maud’s father scrutinizes Helen’s every move while effectively ignoring his other daughter. Brooks explains that Helen’s lighter skin—her proximity to whiteness that renders her more beautiful—prompts the Browns’ regard for her over Maud, as she writes, “[T]he kernel of the matter was that, in spite of these things, [Maud] was poor, and Helen was still the ranking queen, not only
with the Emmanuels of the world, but even with their father—their mother—their brother. . . . They were enslaved, were fascinated, and they were not at all to blame” (35). Just as Ahern argues that “[Maud] seems to acknowledge the larger influence of light-skin privilege in society, possibly rendering her family’s bias less personal in her view” (321-22), Maud possesses an inquisitive mind as she investigates the source of her family’s behavior and distances herself from their shallow perspective.

Her budding insight is none more obvious than when Brooks compares Maud and Helen and writes, “But take that kitchen, for instance! Maud Martha, taking it, saw herself there, up and down her seventeen years, eating apples after school; making sweet potato tarts; drawing, on the pathetic table, the horse that won her the sixth grade prize; . . . And even crying, crying in that pantry, when no one knew” (MM 38-39). Maud engages in a moment of introspection as she takes the perspective that acknowledges her existence and observes her own tears, while her family’s perspective—their gaze directed solely on Helen—overlooks when Maud disappears into the pantry to cry. That is, Maud’s penchant for observation and questioning allows her to pinpoint the racist and sexist ideology that “enslaves” her family and confront the pain it provokes, while her family members fail to question, or even to notice, how their assimilation into a system that values white beauty standards induces her silent suffering. The Browns, including Belva, fail to venture beyond the perspective taught to them, thus leaving Maud neglected and isolated. Accordingly, in the manner that Maud’s critical eye evades her family, the text literalizes how the biased expectations placed on black women largely isolate them.

Belva plays a more active role in the suppression of Maud’s voice in “home,” a chapter that examines how black women’s progressive voices are inscribed within
standards of femininity. In this chapter, Maud Martha, Helen, and their mother await the arrival of Abraham Brown, the family patriarch, who will bring news about whether he received an extension for the loan on their house, and the women’s ensuing discussion evidences how “[Maud] lives alienated from the two blood-related women in her life—the fussy, domineering mother and the vain sister” (Washington, “Taming” 466). Belva seems to believe that her husband will not receive the loan extension and resigns to comforting herself with the unrealistic dream of living in an even nicer home.

Furthermore, Belva has bequeathed her blended hopelessness and detachment from reality to Helen, who also imagines how a new home might suit her social life. While Belva and Helen’s nonchalance fails to attend to the reality that they might lose their home, Maud laments this possibility; “These things might soon be theirs no longer. Those shafts and pools of light, the tree, the graceful iron, might soon be viewed possessively by different eyes,” the text offers as Maud’s thoughts (MM 29). Here, as Maud feels nostalgia at the thought of losing her home, she seems to understand that the pride of property ownership is at stake in that loss. She also seems inclined to question the equity of a system that will turn over their home to the possession of another family, a system that ensures this black family cannot afford their home. The chapter then chronicles how Belva attempts to keep Maud’s nascent voice in check. When Maud anticipates her father’s sorrow, Belva and Helen dismiss her statement, suggesting that he would be content as long as he had his family. Following a particularly biting comment of Maud’s, “Her mother looked at her quickly, decided the statement was not suspect, looked away” (31). At the same time that the text gestures towards Maud’s understanding of the injustice of their situation, Belva seems prepared to discipline the girl if she utters another
statement about how the family deserves their home. In this manner, Brooks’s novel exposes how the filtering of women’s voices through their expected reticence undercuts the radical transformations they seek to share.

As the novel progresses, Maud’s inability to remain wholly in the domestic realm repeatedly engenders the tension between her and her mother. Towards its conclusion, Belva comes to Maud’s kitchenette apartment for tea. That Maud polishes her home in preparation for her mother’s arrival reveals how she anticipates her mother’s expectations and performs accordingly. “Maud Martha spread her little second-hand table . . . with her finest wedding gift, a really good white luncheon cloth. She brought out white coffee cups and saucers, sugar, milk, and a little pink pot of cocoa. She brought a plate of frosted gingerbread. Mother and daughter sat down to Tea,” Brooks writes (MM 166-67). Despite Maud’s elaborate presentation, Belva almost immediately critiques Maud’s home, saying, “I think Paul could do a little better” (167). She follows her critique with her praise of the life Helen pursues in marrying a well-off doctor—a lifestyle perhaps available to Helen because of her lighter skin. Paired with her approbation of Helen’s life choices, Belva’s critique of Maud’s lifestyle signifies her expectation that her daughters exhibit proper femininity no matter the cost, a cost that Hardison evaluates when she writes, “Brooks elucidates working-class black women’s disillusionment due to the domestic fantasies belying their economic and interpersonal realities” (156-57).

Accordingly, Belva’s expectations for Maud’s life prove unrealistic in how they dismiss her reality and strain her wallet. Their hollow conversation culminates in the moment that Maud poses a question disguised as a statement: “It’s funny how some people are just
charming, just pretty, and others, born of the same parents, are just not” (MM 169). Belva responds,

“You’ve always been wonderful, dear.”

They looked at each other.

“I always say you make the best cocoa in the family.” (169)

With her statement, Maud interrogates Belva’s assimilation into a schema that has no room for her, while Belva’s correlation between Maud’s worth and her delicious cocoa announces that Belva will join Maud for no such inquiry. Instead, Belva upholds her stance in the domestic realm in which cocoa comprises the depth of conversation. As mother and daughter stand face-to-face, they do not see eye-to-eye, for Maud cannot simultaneously fulfill the role modeled by her mother and question why such a role denies her worth. In these moments that Belva noticeably undermines the work that Maud does to push the boundaries circumscribing their lives, Brooks’s novel imagines the revolutionary conversations that black women might have beyond the veneer of domesticity.

A reading of the chapter that chronicles Maud’s birth of Paulette serves as a juncture between Maud’s role as daughter and her new role as mother, as it captures how Maud’s lack of expression at the hands of her mother informs how she prioritizes herself over her daughter after Paulette’s birth. In this scene, Brooks grants both Belva and Paulette the capacity to facilitate Maud’s burgeoning voice, Belva in her potential to act as Maud’s midwife. As Maud’s contractions begin, Paul tries to contact doctors, eventually leaving Maud in the care of a neighbor while he goes in search for one. In his absence, Belva arrives, after which Maud births the baby without a doctor. In the lack of
present medical staff, Belva very easily could assist in the birth or even simply offer
Maud some comfort, especially as she has birthed children herself. Nevertheless, as her
stringent adherence to ideals of domesticity has repeatedly suppressed Maud’s voice, so
too do Belva and Maud’s perspectives conflict here. Maud seems to understand their
conflicting interests, as she shuns rather than welcomes Belva: “When her mother, who is
prone to faint over blood, comes in the door, Maud sets her straight about who’s
important in this drama” (Washington, “Taming” 459). Surely Maud’s frustration at her
mother’s entrance stems in part from how Belva has traditionally overlooked Maud’s
suffering—the birthing pains of her expression—instead of helping her confront it.
Brooks literalizes this conflict in their conflicting voices and physical sensations. Despite
Maud’s warnings, Belva fusses about her own ailments and even complains about
Maud’s screaming, thus reiterating how their voices cannot coexist. Moreover, after
Maud gives birth, Belva falls ill while Maud concurrently questions, “Had she ever in her
life felt so well?” (MM 98). While one might suggest that Belva experiences empathy for
Maud that manifests as her own birthing pains of sorts, in actuality Belva’s bodily
sensations accentuate her femininity—her weakness and “fussiness” (95). Accordingly,
the text allows for no commiseration between the women, even to the extent that they
swap rather than share physical sensations, as Belva’s performance of traditionally
feminine weakness belittles Maud’s attempt to articulate her literally paralyzing
experiences. It is important to note that this analysis of Maud Martha does not seek to
pathologize Belva as a poor mother, but rather to demonstrate how Belva’s adherence to
standards of femininity—most of which fail to attend to black women’s racial and
socioeconomic statuses—dismisses the limitations of these standards and precludes any
sort of identity, for herself or her daughter, beyond them. Nevertheless, that Brooks pens
a story about a black woman venturing beyond the lifestyle her mother models
encourages black women to break from the models of femininity that necessarily confine
them.

**Maud Martha and Paulette**

While the first half of the novel tracks the moments before Maud Martha becomes
a mother, the second half could easily follow how Maud rears Paulette. Instead, the
narration of Maud’s adulthood relates her hesitant endeavors for a voice outside the
domestic sphere, whereby it relegates Paulette to the fringes of the text. While the novel
offers the conflicts between Maud’s domestic role and the life beyond motherhood that
she desires, it also includes striking moments that Maud seems to fail as a mother. In
other words, just as the *Negro Digest* article painted Brooks as a poor mother for
pursuing a literary career, so too does Brooks’s novel anticipate how black women might
simultaneously experience condemnation for seeking a life outside the home and fail to
achieve any sort of voice. For instance, during a chapter in which Maud suspects that she
has a tumor, she provides a snapshot of her life—“Decent childhood, happy Christmases;
some shreds of romance, a marriage, pregnancy and the giving birth, her growing child,
her experiments with sewing, her books, her conversations with her friends and enemies”
(*MM* 144)—that hardly privileges her kin relationships over her reading and other
pastimes. Instead, her activities such as reading and “experiments”—activities that could
be said to facilitate Maud’s self-discovery and intellectual growth—stand on equal
ground with those relationships that, by society’s standards, ought to give her the most
fulfillment. As Brooks herself writes, “Home and library taught me that books are bandages and voyages. Links to light. Keys and hammers. Ripe redeemers. Dials and bells and healing hallelujah” (RPT 14), we can only imagine that Maud’s reading offers her the voice that her domestic role fails to give her. At the same time, readers are taken aback by the seeming ease with which Maud welcomes what she presumes to be the end of her life, the nonchalance with which she reflects that her life “hasn’t been bad” (MM 144). Moreover, her assertion that Paulette and Paul’s “sorrow was their business, not hers” (144) could read as her indifference about her daughter’s life after her death.

Insofar as Brooks gestures towards a reading of the protagonist as a poor mother in the midst of her search for self-discovery, Maud Martha exposes a greater need for expanded definitions of motherhood that would restrain from condemning women who seek control over their own lives and allow them to achieve identities beyond the domestic sphere.

In its representation of Maud’s prioritization of herself over her newborn, “a birth” epitomizes the conflict between Maud’s role as mother and the birth of her own voice. The moments following the birth of Paulette diverge from what we might typically expect: failing to examine her newborn, Maud incorrectly assumes she has birthed a boy and persists in this assumption until the doctor arrives. She subsequently forgets about the baby in contemplating how well she feels. Perhaps Maud is simply delirious from the chaos of giving birth in her home with frantic onlookers, none of whom have medical experience, or perhaps Brooks includes these moments to hint that Maud lacks any maternal instincts. Indeed, Maud imposes an incorrect reading on her newborn only to forget momentarily about the child altogether. Accordingly, Maud’s introspection takes

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8 Earlier in the text, Brooks insinuates that these relationships do not satisfy Maud, as Maud thinks, “[T]he breadier love between parents and children; brothers; animals; friend and friend. Those too could not be heavily depended on” (MM 101).
precedence over any inspection of her newborn, as if her concern for herself precludes any connection between her and her child. Insofar as Maud appears “nonmaternal” in the priority she gives to her own thoughts and sensations, Brooks dismantles the idea that women possess an innate capacity for motherhood.

As this chapter concludes, Maud imagines her daughter as “that part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips expressing itself with a voice of its own” (MM 99), only to have her daughter then stare back at her. In her examination of this scene, Washington centralizes how the text initially positions Paulette as Maud’s mouthpiece, saying, “In that one vital moment of pulling life out of herself, Maud experiences her own birth and she hears in the cries of her daughter Paulette something of her own voice” (“Taming” 459). Certainly, this moment alone could be said to suggest that motherhood will invigorate Maud and give her a voice in ways she has never experienced before. However, a reading of this scene must contend with the moment that the baby becomes quiet as Maud and Paulette stare at each other face-to-face. Whereas seconds before both Paulette and her newborn expressed their voices, their abrupt silence seems to invalidate Maud’s reading of her daughter’s voice. Instead, the text emphasizes the dissociation of this mother and daughter and both individuals’ bewilderment at this new relationship, as Washington notes, “[H]owever painful the reproductive act is, it is not the same as the creative process: a child is a separate, independent human being” (“Taming” 459). In the manner that this chapter gestures towards a reading in which Maud finds her voice, only to revoke such a reading, “a birth” anticipates how Maud’s attempted self-discovery discounts Paulette’s participation in her life and consequently calls into question the validity of narratives that necessarily exhibit black women as wives and mothers.
As a side note, it is important to consider how, even as it makes room for her self-discovery beyond the domestic sphere, the novel returns time and again to the limitations that preclude Maud’s endeavor, as evidenced by the chapter called “an encounter.” After attending a lecture by a young black author, Maud comes across her ex-beau, a man who even as a teenager “belonged to the world of the university” (MM 43). As Maud gauges how he will respond to seeing her, she wonders, “Perhaps he would feel she did not belong here, perhaps he would be cold to her” (128). Indeed, David does brush off Maud as he yawns during their conversation and passively plays the part of a gentleman by offering to see her onto a streetcar, only to perk up when they encounter two of his white friends. This chapter is significant for a number of reasons, namely in how Maud anticipates that the university, embodied within the figure of David, will not accept her voice, let alone her presence, in its conversations. And yet Maud simultaneously seems to know that she possesses the capacity to outperform her peers; she performs readings of David’s chatter with his friends that expose his frivolity as well as his intimidation by a speaker for whom “intellectuality was his oyster” (132-33). She never voices these readings, instead honing her “fury” internally (131), because of how the white man and woman speak more confidently than she and how David literally looks down upon her. Accordingly, Brooks’s novel enacts the widespread disdain towards black women’s voices by even the most progressive institutions so as to illuminate the paradox that black women face in seeking an identity in a world that renders them invisible.

The chapter entitled “tree leaves leaving trees” reintroduces Paulette into the text as it literalizes Maud’s isolation between the domestic and public spheres, neither of which offers her the voice she desperately seeks. Maud takes her daughter, who has
bought into the innocent fantasies of Christmas, to see Santa Claus at the mall. While Santa Claus “patted the children’s cheeks, and if a curl was golden and sleek enough he gave it a bit of a tug” (MM 172), he scorns Paulette, even after Maud urges him to listen to her daughter. Brooks writes, “He was unable to see either mother or child” (173), in a moment that asserts that black women have no influence, not even to protect their children, outside of their “proper” sphere. In other words, even in her attempt to resist the norms that deny her existence, Maud’s voice is rendered insignificant. At the same time that Santa negates Maud’s affirmation of her daughter’s, and her own, worth, Maud’s struggling voice incapacitates her interaction with her daughter. When Paulette asks her mother, “Why didn’t Santa Claus like me?” (174), Maud deflects the inquiry by trying to assure her daughter that Santa loves all children equally. While one reading might conclude that Maud misleads her daughter so as to protect her, Maud actually seems to lack the ability to communicate with her daughter. Brooks writes, “She could neither resolve nor dismiss. There were these scraps of baffled hate in her, hate with no eyes, no smile and—this she especially regretted, called her hungriest lack—not much voice” (176). While Washington suggests that “[m]other and child are locked in a conversation that forces Maud out from behind the bright glass of her pretense” (“Taming” 462), Maud and Paulette never actually have any sort of authentic conversation. Maud’s inability to articulate her rage prompts her to wish for Paulette, “Keep her that land of blue!” (MM 176), as she realizes she cannot cope with her daughter’s own realization that society largely overlooks them. The scene concludes in a manner that feels insufficient, particularly from the point of view of Paulette, who knows that her mother has not shared with her the full story. These two fail to discuss the situation, thus leaving Paulette
confused and Maud infuriated. In the manner that this chapter imagines Maud as simultaneously stifled beyond and within her maternal role, Brooks pinpoints the necessity that black women’s voices work to create transformed identities for themselves within and beyond the domestic sphere.

**Black Women’s Subjectivity**

While the novel mostly depicts Belva as a nuisance and Paulette as inessential to Maud’s life, Brooks incorporates some scenes that allow for a reading of motherhood as a role that empowers rather than constrains Maud. These moments are important to the argument of this thesis because they indicate how Brooks does not condemn motherhood itself but rather the cultural narratives that limit women’s experiences to certain acceptable performances of motherhood. After Maud births Paulette only to forget about the baby, Maud imagines for a moment that she hears her voice coming from the child’s mouth. Brooks writes that Maud feels “a bright delight . . . upon first hearing that part of Maud Martha Brown Phillips expressing itself with a voice of its own” (*MM* 99). Though the narrative immediately silences both mother and daughter, thus effectively undercutting this moment, the fact remains that Maud momentarily imagines her child, and more generally her new role as mother, as a mouthpiece for the voice she has struggled to express. While Washington also hints at the subsequent failure of Maud’s relationship with her daughter to sustain that voice, she still emphasizes how “powerful the reproductive act is”: “Pregnancy and the birth of a child connect Maud to some power in herself, some power to speak, to be heard, to articulate feelings” (“Taming” 459).

Maud and Paulette’s later encounter with Santa Claus allows for a similar reading of the daughter as fulfilling the mother’s stunted expression. Here, as Maud finds herself
caught in her rage that Santa neglected her child, Paulette poses questions that expose the inequity of Santa’s behavior. She notes how Santa “liked the other children. He smiled at them and shook their hands” and persistently questions why Santa does not like her (MM 174), thus paving the way for Maud to articulate the realities in which they—black mother and black daughter—live. In fact, that Paulette almost begs her mother to share the truth with her indicates that their relationship very well could become a site of conversations of collective resistance. Just as Brooks saw her own mother as a model whose “instruction” and “love” endured long after her death (RPT 19), we can imagine that Paulette might flourish into the intellectual that her mother is, especially if her mother guides her in that process.

Each of these instances establishes a correlation between Maud’s own self-discovery and her fulfillment within her mothering role. Before Maud hears her voice in Paulette, she rebukes her mother in a subtle moment that bears symbolic significance as Maud’s repudiation of the life her mother represents. In other words, she achieves a voice in her rejection of the narratives that confine her. Similarly, Maud’s inability to repudiate Santa Claus’s actions precedes her stymied conversation with her daughter. As Brooks offers moments that envisage a more fulfilling experience of black motherhood and womanhood, she emphasizes how Maud’s rejection of various external narratives of her worth necessarily precedes her self-discovery within motherhood. Accordingly, as the epigraph to this chapter evidences, black women’s ability to control their own lives has the capability to transform how they approach the roles that previously confined them.

_Maud Martha_ concludes with a statement announcing the protagonist’s pregnancy, which anticipates, quite literally, another chapter in Maud’s life. In this chapter of the
novel, Maud seems exhilarated by the life around her, questioning, “What, what, am I to do with all of this life?” (MM 178). She takes a stroll with her daughter, contemplating how flowers continue to grow even in the midst of the death that surrounds them. She realizes that to be alive is a fortunate fate and thinks, “And, in the meantime, while people did live they would be grand, would be glorious and brave, would have nimble hearts that would beat and beat” (179). At the same time, this chapter also delineates various iterations of violence that surround Maud: the conclusion of World War II brings with it a multitude of casualties and lynchings persist in the South. With its abrupt conclusion and amalgamation of disparate images, this chapter is ambiguous in terms of how to read Maud’s pregnancy. On the one hand, as the list of persisting societal injustices reiterates black women’s invisibility in the black newspapers “whose front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly Beauty, pale and pompadoured” (179), we can easily see how Maud’s pregnancy might re-inscribe her within the very sphere she has attempted to escape. On this thread, Washington writes, “My initial reaction to this ending was critical of Brooks for precluding any growth beyond the domestic life” (“Taming” 465). On the other hand, in the wake of Maud’s failed, yet poignant, conversation with Paulette, Maud could now possess the capability to articulate her resistance to the narratives that neglect her and, in so doing, become the type of mother Walker or Lorde would later imagine. Whether this chapter reclaims motherhood for Maud or condemns her to it, the novel’s concluding ambiguity casts our minds to Maud’s future and the prevailing narratives about black motherhood and womanhood, especially as the decades following its publication see the upsurge of national
conversations about black motherhood as well as black women’s demands to define motherhood for themselves.
CHAPTER TWO

Societal Narratives of Motherhood and *The Bluest Eye*’s Mothers

Thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me, I am amazed by their currency, their tenacity. Hearing “civilized” languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors—I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then.

-Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p. xiii

Toni Morrison’s writing process for *The Bluest Eye* spanned almost a decade, as she began writing the story in 1962 and published it as her first novel in 1970. Beyond the evolution of her book, the 1960s brought new professional and personal roles for Morrison, as she assumed the position of editor for Random House and birthed her two sons. On the national stage, her writing process also coincided with an upsurge of liberal activism, such as the Black Power and women’s liberation movements, as well as the publication of the Moynihan Report (1965), which notably condemned black women as the source of black men’s failure to flourish within American society. While the concurrence of these watershed moments has numerous implications, this era’s various conflicting images of black women are of particular importance to this analysis of historical and literary representations of black motherhood, particularly in how none of these images stemmed from black women themselves. In their push for freedom from racial oppression, black men, particularly those of the Black Power movement, often demanded that black women perform the duties of traditional housewives so as to keep their women from jeopardizing their own power and reproducing for the revolution instead. In the same vein of skewed definitions of motherhood and womanhood, white feminists, in their call for gender equality under the law, circulated and championed a
notion of a “universal” female experience that largely excluded black women’s realities. That *The Bluest Eye* emerges from the decade that produced these representations—or lack thereof—of black women does not necessarily signify that the text is a product of them. Morrison herself wrote, just a year after the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, that “if anything is true of black women, it is how consistently they have . . . defied classification” (“What the Black Woman Thinks”). Consequently, any move to classify Morrison’s first novel within one of the coinciding social movements undercuts the very work the novel does to complicate and undermine the dominant images of black mothers of its time period.

This chapter of the thesis will examine how *The Bluest Eye* represents motherhood in its various maternal characters and question how these representations engage liberal narratives of black motherhood at the time of its publication. Maternal figures abound in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel primarily concerns the interwoven stories of sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and their friend Pecola Breedlove, as it tracks the moments that build towards Pecola’s pregnancy. The narration fluctuates between Claudia’s perspective and an omniscient narrator; Claudia’s viewpoint chronicles her and her sister’s interactions with their quiet and apprehensive friend, all while emphasizing how the MacTeer girls derive from a much healthier home environment, and the omniscient narrator provides the backstories of those in Pecola’s family and community with whom the young girl interacts—including the father that eventually rapes and impregnates her. Both Cholly and Pauline Breedlove abuse, whether physically or emotionally, their daughter, thus forcing her to seek other parental figures, namely mothers, elsewhere. Throughout the course of the novel, Pecola interacts with Mrs.
MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda’s mother; three prostitutes, her upstairs neighbors and
cardinates; Geraldine, the respectable middle-class mother of one of her peers; and Mrs.
Breedlove, her own mother who neglects her in favor of the young daughter of her white
employers. Insofar as these women, as well as Cholly’s great aunt Jimmy whom Pecola
never meets, all vary in how they mother based on their socioeconomic status, geographic
location, marital status, etc., the text offers no “universal” image of motherhood. Rather,
despite these women’s differences, the novel represents most, if not all, of its mothers in
an ambivalent manner. While mothers such as Pauline and Geraldine abuse, abandon, and
reject their children, 9 those mothers who help their families survive, such as Mrs.
MacTeer and Aunt Jimmy, are largely undervalued or misinterpreted by their family
members. As a group, these mothers hardly allow for a reading of motherhood in the
novel as empowering.

Rather than symbolizing Morrison’s personal apprehension about motherhood
itself, the ambivalence with which the text represents its mothers signifies the failures of
the prevailing narratives about black mothers in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, the
moments that another character or the readers read a mother ambivalently expose the
expectations placed on the mother as well as how those expectations fail to attend to her
reality. Morrison complicates the image of the castrating black mother created by white
men and adopted by black men in her inclusion of numerous black mothers who pick up
the slack of their men and exhibit vital strength in their various responsibilities within the
text. That these women’s endeavors are largely misrepresented or overlooked calls into

9 See Amanda Putnam’s “Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest
Eye, Sula, Beloved, and A Mercy” for a specific analysis of maternal violence in the novel. Putnam argues
that these women’s violence allows them to redirect the oppression they experience and accordingly resist
confining definitions of motherhood imposed on their lives.
question the reliability of a cultural stereotype meant to condemn black women’s strength. Moreover, in response to white feminists’ championing a universal women’s experience of sexism, the novel includes black mothers whose racial status precludes their attempted assimilation into white standards of femininity. That these women, such as Pauline and Geraldine, strive for the lifestyles that most white feminists rebuked underscores the disparate needs of white and black women and exposes how sexism does not look the same for women of different races. Accordingly, in its variety of black mothers, the novel epitomizes the variety of mothering experiences in the African-American community while also demonstrating how the acute burdens these women face, including others’ expectations for their lives, isolate them from one another.

**The Black Matriarch**

*The Bluest Eye* includes a number of mothers who embody the matriarch in some form or fashion, a stereotype that, at the time of the novel’s publication, had at its core the exaggeration and exploitation of black women’s strength. A half-decade before the publication of Morrison’s novel, Daniel Moynihan, an employee of the federal government under Lyndon Johnson, released a report entitled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* which disseminated and denounced the image of the black matriarch. In what is now dubbed the Moynihan Report, Moynihan condemned the family structure of African-American communities, namely how black mothers’ power emasculated their sons, as the cause of black men’s economic and social failures. Almost any scholar who writes on black motherhood contends with this momentous publication,¹⁰ as it cast black

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women as the scapegoat for systemic and institutionalized oppression that subjugates black communities. These scholars emphasize how the Report’s accusations against black women diverted attention away from the institutions that perpetuated racism, as epitomized by Michelle Wallace’s charge that “Moynihan, and those who picked up where he left off, were using the black woman as a scapegoat. Rather than carve a piece of pie for the black man out of the white man’s lion’s share, they preferred to take away from the really very little that the black woman had and give that meager slice to him” (116).

While this conservative report emanated from a well-meaning government group with the progressive goal of including African-American men in conversations about citizenship (Feldstein 146), the appropriation of the image of the castrating black mother by black men, especially those associated with the Black Power movement, is even more significant to this analysis. While many black men rejected the Report’s findings, they reacted by asserting their own strength and masculinity, which often materialized in their expectations that their women remain within their homes and within exceedingly traditional narratives of femininity. In other words, the Black Power movement used as kindling for their hyper-masculine ideals the notion that black women’s strength jeopardized their own, whereby they appropriated the stereotype of the matriarch. “Moynihan bared the black man’s awful secret for all to see—that he had never been able to make his woman get down on her knees,” Wallace writes (31). While those who disseminated the matriarch stereotype believed that black women’s strength debilitated their families, The Bluest Eye complicates this notion by demonstrating how strength is

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an essential factor in the survival of black women and their families and how any attempt to diminish these women’s strength simultaneously undercuts the motherwork that sustains black communities.

At the core of the Report’s critique of black women is their nonconformity to traditional notions of femininity and womanhood. The Report castigated what it claimed was black women’s “economic” and “personal” power (Feldstein 143), as it suggested that this “power” resulted in failed mothering that jeopardized their families’ wellbeing. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison includes three characters—the prostitutes nicknamed China, Poland, and Maginot Line—who almost blatantly epitomize the women Moynihan denounced in his Report so as to deconstruct the assumed connection between women’s performance of femininity and their ability to mother. The prostitutes possess numerous characteristics of the matriarch. In the manner that they find “all [men] . . . inadequate and weak” and “took delight in cheating them” (*TBE* 56), these women exploit and even emasculate the men who seek their services, thus embodying the destructive strength associated with the matriarch stereotype. Moreover, at least Miss Marie has birthed children that she seems to have neglected in favor of her chosen occupation. In other words, these women’s sexual promiscuity—their unfeminine lifestyle—jeopardizes their ability to mother. Because of their blatantly unfeminine behaviors, no one, including Pecola’s closest friends, realizes how the prostitutes are actually the most valuable maternal figures in Pecola’s life. In Pecola’s first recorded interaction with these women, we see that Pecola freely enters their home, that she “loved them, visited them, and ran their errands” (50-51). Miss Marie creates stories for her and notably engages in “free” conversation with the girl, to the extent that Pecola converses more with these women
than anyone else in the text. They keep tabs on her whereabouts, such as when Miss Marie knows that Pecola has gone with her mother to work at the Fishers’ house. Furthermore, when Claudia and Frieda discuss these women with Pecola, Pecola defends them, suggesting, “They take me to the movies, and once we went to the carnival. China gone take me to Cleveland to see the square, and Poland gone take me to Chicago to see the Loop. We going everywhere together” (107). Their investment in Pecola’s life, as evidenced here, starkly contrasts that of Pecola’s mother who does not even realize that her daughter visits these women. Clearly, Pecola cares for these women, and they affirm her in a manner that no one else in her life does. In contrast to Moynihan’s diagnosis, then, these women’s exemption from traditional notions of femininity allows them to mother this young girl who feels herself an outcast; these women recognize Pecola as something besides a nuisance, and she recognizes them as something besides “ruined.” Accordingly, Morrison’s inclusion of these women in her novel rejects stereotypes of black mothers that castigate women who do not adhere to traditional performances of femininity.

While men of the Black Power movement utilized the figure of the matriarch to cast blame for the continued subjugation of African-American communities, various mothers in *The Bluest Eye*, namely Pauline Breedlove and Aunt Jimmy, execute vital motherwork because the men in their families neglect their familial responsibilities. Beginning with the moment that Cholly redirects his hatred of the white men who catch him having sex onto his young partner, the text establishes him as a black man who mistakenly views black women as hindrances to his own freedom. The text even says that Cholly positions his wife as the victim of his unrealized frustrations towards the systems
that render him powerless: “[Pauline] was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact” (TBE 42). This passage which articulates how Cholly’s interactions with Pauline interrelate with his oppression bears a striking resemblance to Wallace’s explication of historical relationships between black men and women which says that, for the black man, “The black woman had no value. He projected his self-hatred onto her. She reminded him of his oppression, of his mythic inability to assert himself as a man. Even if he allowed himself to be with her, he was reluctant to supply her with the kind of reinforcement and approval she craved” (158). Accordingly, just as men of the Black Power movement utilized the matriarch stereotype to release their rage from their lack of freedom, so too does he loathe his wife so as to avoid addressing racist systems in such a manner that “would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke” (TBE 151).

The novel repeatedly expresses how Pauline’s roles as wife and mother directly correlate with her husband’s search for liberation and subsequent lack of responsibility to his family. In the first interaction between Pauline and Cholly recorded in the novel, drunk Cholly refuses to get coal when Pauline asks, prompting her to yell, “If working like a mule don’t give me the right to be warm, what am I doing it for? You sure ain’t bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we’d all be dead” (TBE 40-41).\footnote{See Zora Neale Hurston’s \textit{Mules and Men} for more on how black women imagine themselves as mules working for their husbands.} This exchange is significant for numerous reasons. First, in the manner that their interaction repeats itself every time Cholly comes home drunk, Cholly and Pauline’s roles within
their relationship are precisely calculated in relation to each other, thus evidencing how gender roles build off each other. Moreover, the scene reveals how Pauline has extra work to do because of Cholly’s “dangerous freedom” (159). In other words, Cholly’s apathy prompts Pauline’s drudgery, and Pauline finds herself entrapped in her home. Having children only intensifies Pauline’s need for strength, as she must go back to work after the birth of Sammy: “It was time to put all of the pieces together, make coherence where before there had been none. The children gave her this need; she herself was no longer a child” (126). Despite the emotional abuse that she inflicts upon her children, the fact remains that her family survives, albeit meagerly, because she works while Cholly wallows in his drunkenness guised as freedom. Accordingly, Pauline’s relationship with her husband reveals how strength is a requirement, not a privilege, for black women, especially those whose husbands tend towards misogynistic pursuits of freedom. That Cholly loathes Pauline even though she keeps a roof over his head exposes the paradoxical nature of the matriarch stereotype, as black women were both crucial for and disparaged within African-American communities.

Before Cholly marries Pauline, his great aunt Jimmy plays a similar role to Pauline in how she assumes the position of Cholly’s caretaker when neither of his parents claims him. Aunt Jimmy raises Cholly on her own, so their relationship epitomizes the single-mother family structure Moynihan rebukes in his report out of fear that matriarchal women “made black men submissive; they made it harder for men to be productive citizens and harder for them to strut” (Feldstein 144). While no one directly suggests that Aunt Jimmy’s care threatens Cholly’s development, one of the guests at Aunt Jimmy’s funeral commends how Jimmy’s brother will adopt the boy, saying, “[T]he boy need a
man’s hand” (*TBE* 142). Cholly himself even wonders why his own father never played a role in his upbringing and questions Aunt Jimmy as to why she did not name him after his father. Moreover, that the text filters the story of Cholly’s upbringing through his consciousness portrays Aunt Jimmy in an ambivalent manner. Though Cholly acknowledges that Aunt Jimmy saved him,

Sometimes when he watched Aunt Jimmy eating collards with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth, or smelled her when she wore the asafetida bag around her neck, or when she made him sleep with her for warmth in the winter and he could see her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown—then he wondered whether it would have been just as well to have died there. Down in the rim of a tire under a soft black Georgia sky. (132-33)

Instead of venerating his great aunt and the sacrifices she made for him, Cholly reveres the drayman at his job—Blue Jack, “the woman-killer” (151). Accordingly, just as the Black Power movement championed a hyper-masculine agenda that discounted the crucial contributions of black women, so too does Cholly dismiss the work that Aunt Jimmy performs in favor of a hyper-masculine figure in his life.

Of course, what Cholly does not immediately understand is that Aunt Jimmy’s body, with its stench, droops, and deterioration, harbors an inordinate amount of strength that provides for him the best upbringing he could have had considering the circumstances. After Aunt Jimmy falls ill, she and her friends reminisce about the pain and misery their lives have seen. Their conversation focuses heavily on their bodies, as they make sense of the progression of their lives by way of the scars and bruises they
have accumulated along the way, and these markings tell of how they have exhibited strength and perseverance amidst their oppressive circumstances:

   Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, “Do this.” White children said, “Give me that.” White men said, “Come here.” Black men said, “Lay down.” The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. (*TBE* 138)

Rather than envisioning Aunt Jimmy’s strength as encumbering her family members, as Moynihan might, this and the following passages demonstrate how Aunt Jimmy’s low status in the social hierarchy demands that she work extremely hard to keep herself and her kinfolk—including Cholly—alive. Accordingly, Cholly’s longing for his own father and admiration of Blue Jack depreciate the sacrifices made by the very woman who salvages and sustains his life.

   In the case of Aunt Jimmy’s role in Cholly’s life, the novel tracks his desire for a strong male presence in his life so as to demonstrate the toxicity of this masculinity and the significance of his maternal figure. After Aunt Jimmy’s funeral, Cholly fleas to Macon to find his father—to fill whatever void existed from growing up in a female-dominated household. However, when he finds his father in a group of men in an alleyway, his father rejects him, telling him to “get the fuck outta my face!” (*TBE* 156). The stress of this encounter causes Cholly to soil himself and long instead for Aunt

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12 As she recounts an article by Angela Davis entitled “The Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” Umanksy includes the following passage which largely resembles the descriptions of Aunt Jimmy and her companions: “The slave woman, and by implication, the generations of black women succeeding her, was not only without fault in her reputed ‘strength,’ but was a revolutionary, a bulwark against the depredations on all black people. The positive role of the nurturing, but roughly ‘equal,’ black mother could not be overstated” (90).
Jimmy’s affection: “With a longing that almost split him open, he thought of her handing him a bit of smocked hock out of her dish. He remembered just how she held it—clumsy-like, in three fingers, but with so much affection” (158). In other words, it is his attempted assimilation into the hyper-masculine environment his father inhabits that inhibits him and leaves him courting “dangerous freedom,” not any sort of emasculation Aunt Jimmy enacted upon him. Despite Cholly’s initial ambivalence towards her, Jimmy’s vigor sustains rather than stymies Cholly and leaves him floundering after her death in his attempts to replicate the masculinity of Blue Jack and his father. Accordingly, Aunt Jimmy’s presence in the novel exposes how the stereotype of the black matriarch relies on black men’s misguided, rather than fruitful, frustrations in their pursuit of freedom.

Just as Cholly undervalues and accordingly misrepresents Aunt Jimmy’s crucial role in his life, so too does Claudia frequently distort her mother’s words and actions in such a manner that reveals how easily black women’s motherwork can obscure their love. In the moments that Claudia’s voice narrates the text, she frequently portrays her mother as an enigmatic character that she must decode. For instance, Claudia discloses how she and her sister rarely address the “grown-ups” and suggests that this lack of intimacy in their relationships with their parents means that “We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (TBE 23, 15). Here, Claudia and Frieda listen in on their mother’s conversation with her friends about their new boarder, a

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13 Washington explores this idea in her analysis of Eva Peace in Morrison’s Sula. About Eva, Washington writes, “This is the love of a woman who battled her way through life in order to keep her kids from starving . . . She did not have anything left over to play around with them or teach them games or be silly with them and so her strength actually seems like a kind of cold indifference. . . . Eva takes care of her children, but she does so without physical affection or tenderness” (Black-Eyed Susans xxii).
scene that Morrison imbues with an aura of mystery as readers do not know with whom Mrs. MacTeer converses or who offers each statement in their dialogue. Claudia further casts her mother as cryptic when she tells how her mother’s mood penetrates their home. She says, “If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. . . . But without song, those Saturdays sat on my head like a coal scuttle, and if Mama was fussing, as she was now, it was like somebody throwing stones at it” (25-26). Mrs. MacTeer’s ambiguous behavior leaves her children hastening to interpret how to interact with her. Interestingly, these moments seem to position Mrs. MacTeer less as a bad mother and more as a burdened one—in these cases with the arriving boarder and fostering Pecola. In other words, this woman’s absorption in her responsibilities—those that feed and provide for her children—obscures her character, rendering her aloof from her children and stringent in her expectations for them.

In one particular scene regarding Claudia’s illness, Claudia misinterprets her mother’s behavior by exaggerating her toughness while overlooking her concern. Claudia recounts how her mother rebukes her upon learning of her illness and how “My mother’s anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying” (TBE 11). She also describes how her mother’s “large and rough” hands rub salve on her chest until she is “rigid with pain” (11). Via the perspective of the young child, Mrs. MacTeer momentarily becomes the woman condemned in the Moynihan Report, the woman that is “too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine” (Wallace 91). In fact, in her article on maternal violence in Morrison’s oeuvre, Amanda Putnam reads Mrs. MacTeer’s behavior as “emotional abuse” that “evoke[s] pity for the girls” (31, 30), a reading that participates in Claudia’s pathologizing her mother. Just as
the image of the matriarch surfaced as a means for white and black men to criticize black women’s strength instead of confronting systemic racism, Claudia’s initial reading of her illness directs her frustration onto her mother—who notably performs the necessary tasks for Claudia to recuperate—instead of the illness itself. The multi-temporal nature of Claudia’s narration is important, as it evidences how her misinterpretation of her mother does not last. As she narrates the scene, she simultaneously assumes the perspective of herself as a child and that of herself looking back on her childhood. After remembering how she felt as a child, Claudia questions, “But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. . . . So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die” (TBE 12). Years removed from this encounter, Claudia seems to realize that her mother’s worry masks the love that undergirds it. Insofar as her commitment to keeping her family alive requires “unfeminine” characteristics such as firmness and outspokenness, Mrs. MacTeer epitomizes how black women’s work easily goes undervalued. She joins the ranks of black women who become scapegoats for issues ranging from sickness to systemic racism—a trend that Morrison invalidates in her representations of how these women’s strength proves vital in sustaining even those that condemn them.

A Universal (White) Women’s Experience

As evidenced by the aforementioned maternal figures, black families’ socioeconomic statuses often precluded black mothers from exhibiting traditionally feminine characteristics, which, in the case of Pauline Breedlove, leaves her longing for the lifestyle encompassed within those ideals of white femininity. Considering that white feminists at the time of the novel’s publication largely rejected these same standards, this
analysis will also briefly examine how Pauline’s desire for the lifestyle white feminists spurned reveals how black women and white women had at the time widely disparate livelihoods, especially in regards to motherhood. In 1963, Betty Friedan published her acclaimed book *The Feminist Mystique*, a book that claimed that traditional notions of femininity confine women within the domestic sphere. Friedan’s text spearheaded national conversations on the plight of women and helped to develop the women’s liberation movement that spanned the 1960s and 1970s. A number of critics of the women’s liberation movement, including many black women, opposed how the movement centralized, and even rendered ubiquitous, white women’s concerns while failing to heed those of women of color. Morrison entered these conversations about the movement’s failings with her article “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” published in 1971, just a year after the publication of *The Bluest Eye*. Her article lists a number of reasons why black women did not flock to the predominately white women’s feminist movement, including black women’s disrespect for white women’s immaturity and their prioritization of liberation for black people over women. She also criticizes the biased generalizations about womanhood that fueled the feminists’ demands and refutes such a possibility for black women:

It may not even be possible to look at those militant young girls with lids lowered in dreams of guns, those middle-class socialites with 150 pairs of shoes, those wispy girl junkies who have always been older than water, those beautiful Muslim women with their bound hair and flawless skin, those television personalities who think chic is virtue and happiness a good coiffure, those sly old women in the country with their ancient love of Jesus—and still talk about The Black Woman.
It is a dangerous misconception, for it encourages lump thinking. (“What the Black Woman Thinks”)

In other words, in the midst of white feminists’ assertion of universal female experiences, Morrison argues that not even all black women have shared experiences. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline’s story contrasts the “typical” female experiences put forth by white feminists and illuminates how their demands generally discounted black women’s financial concerns.

Morrison first establishes the discrepancy between white women and black women’s socioeconomic realities with her repetition of excerpts from the Dick and Jane story. This story includes a white family that owns a nice green-and-white house and a mother that laughs and laughs. Morrison introduces Pauline’s backstory—the narrative of her evolving dissatisfaction with her impoverishment—with the following Dick and Jane excerpt: “SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMOTHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJA NEMOTHERLAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA” (*TBE* 110). Pauline’s ensuing story which details her labor and apathetic husband stands in stark contrast to the ease of Jane’s mother’s life. Ágnes Surányi’s interpretation of these Dick and Jane excerpts precisely articulates this discrepancy when she suggests that Morrison uses the passages to signify “on the white hegemonic discourse that has nothing to do with the realities of black life and refuses to accept the definition of the African American experience according to white standards” (13). That is, the lifestyle of Jane’s mother is incommensurable with Pauline’s socioeconomic status. Insofar as Morrison asserts that “[w]hite women were ignorant of the facts of life—perhaps by choice, perhaps with the assistance of men—but ignorant anyway” (“What the Black Woman Thinks”), the
juxtaposition of Jane’s mother with Pauline’s circumstances evidences how black women might struggle to respect any call for liberation from women whose lives already appear free.

The discordant interests of white and black women materialize most poignantly in an interaction between Pauline and her first employer. When Cholly shows up drunk to Pauline’s workplace, the lady of the house, a white woman, threatens to fire Pauline and refuses to pay her until Pauline leaves her husband. Despite her more conservative suggestion that Cholly ought to be the couple’s primary breadwinner, the white woman’s demands of Pauline echo white feminists’ demands for respect from men. While this woman believes she has Pauline’s interests in mind, Pauline needs the money that the employer withholds from her in order to eat and pay her bills. In other words, the white woman’s entreaty for equality between Pauline and Cholly discounts Pauline’s subjugation within a system that perpetuates her impoverishment, effectively overlooking the fact that Pauline needs consistent pay before she can demand equality. Pauline’s thoughts in response to her employer’s request could stand alone as a scathing critique of the women’s liberation movement: “How you going to answer a woman like that, who don’t know what good a man is, and say out of one side of her mouth she’s thinking of your future but won’t give you your own money so you can buy you something besides baloney to eat?” (TBE 121). Pauline’s arguably justified disdain for her employer literalizes how black women could interpret white feminists’ appeals as not only unrevolutionary, but also as integral to a patriarchal, racist system that traps black women within poverty.
Specifically in regards to motherhood, white feminists’ assertion that access to employment would bring them occupational fulfillment as well as satisfaction within their maternal capacities does not hold true for those women, particularly women of color, whose work comprises their maternal duties. In her consideration of the implications of *The Feminine Mystique* for notions of motherhood, Feldstein names Friedan’s separation of home and work the book’s “crucial distinction—between the human self who could realize her potential as a citizen through meaningful work and the mother in the domestic sphere” (Feldstein 154). Friedan’s demands fail to account for how, in Morrison’s novel, for instance, Pauline not only must work to support her family but also finds that her work amplifies her dissatisfaction with her own life. The birth of Pauline’s first child, Sammy, forces her to work, whereas she had previously worked in order to afford the luxuries that other women possessed. In direct contrast to Friedan’s claim, Pauline’s work brings her neither a sense of fulfillment in her work nor a greater satisfaction with her home life. Instead, Pauline says of her children, “I loved them and all, I guess, but maybe it was having no money, or maybe it was Cholly, but they sure worried the life out of me. Sometimes I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I’d feel sorry for them, but I couldn’t seem to stop” (TBE 124). Here, Pauline implies that her role as mother is tainted by her inability to provide for her children the life of financial security—the life of Jane and her laughing mother. In other words, instead of viewing work as a privilege or opportunity, as white feminists might, Pauline’s socioeconomic status forces her to work for a meager existence and thus renders her bitter towards those she feels obligated to support. As Wallace considers black women’s ambivalence towards the women’s liberation movement, she reminds her readers that “[f]rom the day the black
woman first set foot on the American shore, . . . The black woman had not chosen her work. It was something she had to do, either because of the whip or to keep her family from starving—a necessity, a drudgery” (125). Instead of imagining work and home as formulating a fruitful life for Pauline, Morrison complicates this experience of motherhood by making room for a woman whose mothering and work are burdens that exacerbate each other.

In fact, in Pauline’s case, her work actually makes her a poor mother for her children. In the text’s description of Pauline’s work, it is evident that her role as a domestic servant reminds her of the life she does not have:

She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. (*TBE* 127)

Her role in the Fisher home allows her a maternal function that comes with its fair share of luxury and, accordingly, fuels her distaste for her own home and family. In the manner that “she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep” (127), she cannot separate her own mothering from her desire and simultaneous inability to provide a lifestyle for her children and herself that emulates her workplace. So, while white feminists demanded opportunities to escape domesticity and enter the workforce, Pauline desires the very lifestyle, with its ease and financial stability, that these women try to escape. Wallace writes that many black women of the time simply desired “a house, a picket fence around it, a chicken in the pot, and a man”
(162). Consequently, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how the financial strain on many black communities forestalls black women’s pursuit of liberation from sexism, even to the extent that they actually strive for the ease of life that shoulders white feminists’ demands for more. Especially as Pauline Breedlove finds herself antagonized by a black man and misunderstood by a white woman and accordingly fails to name an identity for herself, her character in particular sets the stage for the upsurge of black women’s texts—texts that allowed these women to define their own stories—in and after the 1970s.

**A Cross-Generational Black Feminism**

Despite its ambivalent representations of motherhood, the novel nods towards a cross-generational reclamation of motherhood within black communities, just like Walker would envision four years later. As mentioned previously, Claudia simultaneously tells and revises her memory of a particular illness during which her mother cared for her. As the young Claudia interprets her mother’s roughness as her anger, the older Claudia that narrates the text some amount of time removed from its happenings revises this image of her mother, focusing instead on the love that undergirds Mrs. MacTeer’s strength. In this moment, Claudia reclaims her mother’s image from the narratives that previously misidentified her. In a similar moment that gestures towards a cross-generational understanding among women, Claudia conflates her own memories of summer storms with a story, albeit exaggerated, of a summer storm her mother knew. Claudia says,

> I recall a summer storm in the town where we lived and imagine a summer my mother knew in 1929. There was a tornado that year, she said, that blew away half of south Lorain. I mix up her summer with my own... In the summer tornado of
1929, my mother’s hand is unextinguished. She is strong, smiling, and relaxed while the world falls down about her. (TBE 187-88)

At the same time that Claudia understands that she and her mother share experiences of treacherous storms, she cannot separate her own endeavor to weather the storm from her mother’s, and her memory casts her mother as indomitable. Accordingly, in the midst of the various misrepresentations of black mothers within the novel, Claudia anticipates the very goal of black feminists in the 1970s to claim black women’s motherhood across generations as an assertion of the strength they have always possessed.

Even though *The Bluest Eye* could be said to anticipate how black feminists will utilize motherhood to unite black women across generations, its representations of motherhood also reveal the nuances of establishing a black feminist criticism. Just as Morrison concludes that there exists no universal image of “The Black Woman,” the novel’s black mothers all lead distinct lives and, consequently, remain mostly separate from each other. Mrs. Breedlove scorns the prostitutes, while Mrs. MacTeer scorns Mrs. Breedlove. Certainly, these women’s varying socioeconomic statuses, geographic locations, and marital statuses preclude any sort of camaraderie they might share while also determining how they mother their own children and those of the community. Moreover, insofar as “[i]t is extremely difficult to assert oneself when there remains some question of one’s basic identity” (Wallace 173), *The Bluest Eye* evidences how the immense burdens and controlling narratives placed on black women can have isolating consequences. As these women work to survive within their confined environments, friendships hardly seem a priority for most of them. Just as Wallace suggests that “the black woman has no legitimate way of coming together with other black women, no
means of self-affirmation—in other words, no women’s movement, and therefore no collective ideology” (172), the novel anticipates how the acute and overwhelming burdens of being black and being female—the work they perform and the scrutiny they undergo—complicate their collective resistance at the same time that defining their own narratives was absolutely vital for them.

The novel concludes with a pessimistic picture of motherhood in Pauline’s neglect of her daughter and Pecola’s loss of her baby. Pecola’s story largely diverges from the predominant images of motherhood from the time period of the novel’s publication. She is neither excessively strong, nor is her pregnancy hidden behind other more conspicuous voices. Rather, Pecola represents, according to Morrison, “the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (TBE xi), and as such, her pregnancy and its aftermath comprise the gossip of Lorain. Claudia narrates this section as she lists all the ways in which her community exploited and isolated Pecola during the time of her greatest need. While Claudia venerates her own mother, she also realizes how she participated in the societal neglect of this young almost-mother, as she remembers how “we tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near” (204). If nothing else, the juxtaposition of these final images of Claudia’s strong mother and her delicate friend serves as a reminder of the diversity of mothering experiences in black communities. The juxtaposition of this mother and almost-mother serves as a reminder that the same hardships—racism, sexism, and poverty—that produce Mrs. MacTeer’s strength also produce Pecola’s weakness, that even Mrs. MacTeer’s strong motherhood cannot protect young Pecola from her life on the fringes. Accordingly, The Bluest Eye not only represents the myriad motherhoods that
a black feminist criticism must address, but it also gives voice to a concern that black mothers have questioned for centuries: How do we mother within a nation of systemic racism?
CHAPTER THREE

Mothering within Systemic Racism in *Salvage the Bones*

We’re tired. We’re tired of having to figure out how to talk to our kids and teach them that America sees them as less, and that she just might kill them. This is the conversation we want to avoid.

-Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time*, p. 9

In its abundance of black male characters who face violence and potential criminalization, Jesmyn Ward’s corpus engages the most prevalent concerns of African-American communities across the nation. Just as conversations concerning how police brutality and the mass incarceration of black men have garnered significant media attention over the past decade, Ward’s memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) chronicles how five slain black men from her community, including her brother, succumbed to mental health issues, criminalization, and/or death within the system of impoverishment that plagues her town. Her latest novel entitled *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) examines the racial dynamics of a prison farm called Parchman and includes the unfortunately familiar moment that a police officer pulls a gun on a young black boy as he reaches for a note in his pocket. Even in their plethora of black men, Ward’s works can hardly be said to neglect the particular hardships of black women and their relationships to these violent trends against black men. In her memoir, she suggests that the stories of the deceased men from her hometown are inextricably linked with the stories of the women in her community and with her own story: “Because this is my story just as it is the story of

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14 In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander frames mass incarceration as a racial and gendered issue, as she includes statistics about the considerable number of black men with criminal records and criticizes how prisons continue to fill with “black and brown men” (9). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* offers a similar reading of police brutality; she writes, “[W]hen police shoot to kill, they are usually taking aim at African American men” (163).
those lost young men, and because this is my family’s story just as it is my community’s story, it is not straightforward” (MWR 8). Furthermore, in various interviews and anecdotes Ward offers, she expresses what has become a common refrain among black mothers that the societal trends of racial violence haunt her as a mother. In an NPR interview in which Ward discusses writing and raising her children in her hometown, she says, “Part of me is panicking, . . . thinking about my children and thinking about the place that I’m choosing to raise them in, and thinking about my brother, and wondering: Am I gonna be able to raise my children to adulthood? Are they gonna live to be adults, to be old as I am now, in this climate, in this country?” (Block). Accordingly, this chapter will examine, by way of Ward’s writing, the particular responsibilities and anxieties of black mothers within an environment that seems to ensure violence against their children.

While Ward’s most recent novel, Sing, Unburied, Sing, includes an ambivalent representation of motherhood in the character of Leonie, this analysis will primarily focus on Salvage the Bones, the author’s second novel, for its cast of a single female, the teenager Esch, within a family comprised solely of men. The novel, told from Esch’s perspective, spans a twelve-day period during which Esch discovers she is pregnant while her family, an impoverished black family in rural Mississippi, prepares for and lives through Hurricane Katrina. The Batistes’ home, tellingly called the Pit, acts as a microcosm of the community Ward describes in her memoir, a community ravaged by violence and poverty. The incoming hurricane is not anomalous but rather acts as part of

15 See the prologue of Karla Holloway’s Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, Sybrina Fulton’s letter to Michael Brown’s parents published in Time, Claudia Rankine’s “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” and Edwidge Danticat’s “Message to My Daughters.” Moreover, I do not mean to suggest that this trend simply pertains to black women. Black men from Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin to Ta-Nehisi Coates have questioned how systemic violence will affect their children.
a string of storms, illnesses, and violence that plague the family. While the siblings try to lead normal lives—they watch Skeetah’s dog China give birth to a litter of puppies and participate in a dogfight, observe numerous basketball scrimmages both at their home and in the community, and hang out with the boys that frequent their home—they struggle to pay for food and supplies, which repeatedly prompts Skeetah to commit petty thefts. Just as Ward suggests that racist institutions plague her town even despite its scarcity of white people, the Batistes’ white neighbors remain on the fringes of the Pit and of their story, yet they simultaneously present the possibility that one of the siblings might be criminalized or killed for their attempts to escape their boundless impoverishment. Moreover, bloodshed abounds within the confines of their land, as evidenced by Daddy’s hacked fingers and Skeetah’s mangled side. And at the same time that these patterns persist on the Pit, mutilating and depleting Esch’s brothers and her father, Esch reckons with the secret of her pregnancy amidst her memories of her late mother’s life and death. She recollects how her mother protected and nurtured each member of the family and questions rather ambivalently how she will now introduce a child into the world of the Pit, a world that has changed since her mother’s death. In the moments that these separate narratives—Esch’s internal turmoil and concurrent surveillance of her brothers’ activity—overlap, the novel reveals both the precariousness and the exigency of black motherhood in a systemically violent society.

In order to analyze motherhood in Salvage the Bones, we must contend with its nuanced layers of motherhood, as Esch tries to understand her pregnancy while revisiting

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16 See Holly Cade Brown’s “Figuring Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Bare Life’ in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker” and Christopher Clark’s “What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies, and Community in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones” for analyses of how the novel conflates various forms of destruction, including the storm, so as to align the Batistes within a history of neglect and abuse of black communities.
memories of her late mother—and all this while Mother Earth threatens to ravage her family. Interestingly, even despite the persistent threats to her livelihood, Esch rarely articulates any anxiety or grief. Instead, she reports her and her family’s activities in a methodical manner, and her pain, rage, or grief only emerge in moments of intense stress. In this manner, Esch’s story-telling demonstrates how she has repressed her circumstances, a defense mechanism Lois Tyson defines as “the expunging from consciousness . . . [of] unhappy psychological events” (12). In a recent article for The Atlantic, Ward insinuates that repression, especially that concerning poverty and racism, was prevalent in her family and in her own upbringing when she writes, “My grandmother speaks openly of her lasting desire for fancy clothes, but she never mentions hunger. It is the subtext of her stories, the unspoken thing I imagine following her through the fields, crawling along the rows with her like one of her siblings as she chafes against her dress” (“Racism”). Accordingly, this analysis will examine the subtexts of Esch’s narrative to show how her impoverishment and her grief inform how she understands her pregnancy and her nascent role as mother. Insofar as repression “doesn’t eliminate our painful experiences and emotions” but rather “gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience” (Tyson 12), the moments that Esch releases some of her anxiety, albeit scarce, situate her pregnancy as another adversity that intensifies the oppression her family encounters. At the same time, the ubiquity of violence and hunger on the Pit precludes Esch’s understanding of how she has been a maternal figure within her family since her mother’s death. In Esch’s ambivalence about her new role, Salvage the Bones enacts black mothers’ dread that they cannot counteract the forces of racism and poverty that almost inevitably afflict their families.
Esch’s Maternal Anxieties

Towards the end of the novel, Esch offers a memory of her childhood that evinces how she came to adopt repression as a defense mechanism. As Randall seeks Esch’s help after Manny rejects her, she says,

I follow Randall around the house because it is the only thing I can do; if this is strength, if this is weakness, this is what I do. . . . After Mama died, Daddy said, *What are you crying for? Stop crying. Crying ain’t going to change anything.* We never stopped crying. We just did it quieter. . . . This was the only thing that we could do. (*STB* 206)

Here, Esch suggests that she learned to stifle her emotions in order to avoid Daddy’s reprimands as well as the grief that could squelch her. Years removed from her mother’s death, her pregnancy complicates her schematization of her anxieties. On the novel’s second day, Esch discovers her pregnancy and spends much of the remainder of the text ruminating on her discovery without telling anyone. Her process of understanding her new state mainly involves acknowledging the moments that her pregnant body acts differently than before, reminiscing on how her mother cared for her and her siblings, and scrutinizing China’s postpartum body and interactions with her puppies—none of which require that she claims her new role. Instead, Esch remains mostly disassociated from her pregnancy for the majority of the text, only accepting the ambiguous truth that “[t]here is something there” (*STB* 36). In the manner that Esch neither claims her pregnancy nor names her family’s hardships, her pregnancy—her most recent adversity—uncovers her anxieties about the more ubiquitous adversities within her life. In other words, Esch’s pregnancy intensifies rather than ameliorates her concerns about her family’s well-being.
In her emphasis on how her pregnant body obstructs her survival, her pregnancy embodies the impediments that perpetuate her family’s impoverishment and ensure their danger. Furthermore, her scrutiny of China’s interactions with her puppies, many of which turn violent, allows Esch to project onto Skeetah’s dog her fear of the violence that might destroy her family. In the manner that Esch’s pregnancy—her budding role as mother—exacerbates her maternal concern over her family’s precarious existence, the novel pinpoints black mothers’ helplessness within a system that demands and diminishes their maternal strength.

It is first important to consider the role the Batistes’ mother holds in Esch’s ruminations about her pregnancy. I will largely rely on Mary Ruth Marotte’s reading of their mother, as Marotte specifies the ways that their mother facilitates the children’s survival in such a manner that establishes a stark contrast between their lives with and without her. Just as Marotte offers that “nearly all of Esch’s recollections of her mother involve her fortifying and guiding them” (“Pregnancies” 177), the novel abounds with memories of how the Batistes’ mother alleviates the hardships they endure. In the face of their potential hunger, Esch’s mother fed her children by killing chickens and gathering eggs, and Esch struggles to perform this latter task after her mother dies. When her husband would seek to ameliorate the suffering in his life with drink, “Mama would walk out to meet him, gather him to her like a child” (STB 103-104). And in the midst of the wounds and illnesses her children incurred, Esch’s mother soothed their pain and treated their wounds in such a manner that diminished the pain. Marotte also gestures towards how the Batistes struggle to maintain the life their mother created for them, suggesting, “Without Mama, they are ineffectual and stymied, unable to care for themselves or one
another in any satisfying manner” (“Pregnancies” 178). This analysis will take Marotte’s reading one step further by demonstrating how, within the narrative’s subtexts, survival and anguish both figure prominently in Esch’s conception of motherhood, as prompted by Esch’s grief over her mother’s death and her fear that she cannot perform strong mothering like her mother did. In other words, Esch’s repressed anguish over her family’s precarious existence, initiated after the loss of her mother, organizes how she interprets her pregnancy.

For instance, Esch’s pregnant body’s simultaneous need for extra food and repulsion at the smell of it unearths her deep-rooted fear that her family does not have enough to eat. In her biographical writing, Ward recollects the persistent ache of hunger that comprised her childhood, as she writes, “I remember hunger. I think it was the hunger of childhood, the need for fuel to grow, but it was blinding sometimes. Sometimes not even the food in my belly appeased it” (“Racism”). And yet Esch seems to have repressed everything, including the ensuing “blinding” hunger, from her mother’s death, and she only articulates her hunger in relation to her pregnancy. Early in the text, Esch reveals that her pregnant body simulates her impoverished body when she says, “I know something’s wrong; for weeks I’ve been throwing up every other day, always walking around feeling like someone’s massaging my stomach, trying to push the food up and out of me. Some months when I eat a little less because I’m tired of ramen or potatoes, I’m irregular” (STB 30). While she goes on to list how her body has acted particularly peculiarly over the past few weeks, the fact remains that Esch conceptualizes her pregnancy as another hardship that inflicts her body. As the novel progresses, we learn that her pregnancy both intensifies her need to eat and leaves her unable to keep the food
down, thus forcing her into a situation in which she squelches and subsequently wastes the food her family has.

The subtext of these moments is the family’s desperate search for food as the hurricane approaches, the harsh reality of their hunger that presents her pregnant body as nothing more than starving. In the days leading up to the storm, they search for chicken eggs and cook everything—which amounts to almost nothing—in the fridge. The storm heightens the urgency of their impoverishment, as this iteration of oppression against them and their home threatens to impoverish them even more. Despite the urgency of their search, Esch only links her pregnancy with their lack of food once when she admits that her pregnancy leaves her “filching Daddy’s hurricane supplies” (STB 109). Her overlapping anxieties about her pregnancy and her family’s hunger, repressed for much of the text, culminate in the moment that Skeetah brings home nothing but Ramen for their hurricane stock. With a “voice harder than I have ever heard it,” Esch complains that Skeetah has purchased “[b]arely enough for five people!” (192). Her hunger drives her rebuke, and yet it also expresses her maternal concern for her family’s nourishment, especially as her family will soon gain its sixth member. Accordingly, Esch’s rare outburst articulates how her pregnancy both consumes and further necessitates her family’s scarce food supply, leaving her helpless to ameliorate her family’s pervasive hunger.

As a result of the family’s impoverishment, they often have to steal in order to provide for themselves, and Esch’s pregnancy also intensifies the threat that she or her brothers will get caught in the act. The text gestures towards tension between Esch’s nascent role and her vulnerability to criminalization when Esch has to steal a pregnancy
test. While nothing comes of this moment—indeed their petty thefts seem so normal that Esch hardly describes the act itself—her pregnant body later jeopardizes their safety in a similar situation. During the fourth day of the novel, Esch and Skeetah journey to the white neighbors’ farm in order to steal cow wormer for China and her puppies. As they run there, Esch ruminates on her instinct for running, as she says, “My body does what it was made to do: it moves. Skeetah cannot leave me. I am his equal” (STB 66). For Esch, running is her body’s predisposition. However, just as Iris Marion Young’s analysis of pregnancy suggests, “In pregnancy my prepregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move” (50),17 Esch subsequently finds that her pregnant body needs to urinate, thus causing her to take her eyes off Skeetah and miss the white couple’s arrival. Subsequently, when the white couple notices the intruders, Esch’s growing belly slows down her running to the extent that the dog at their heels almost catches her.

Notably, Esch does not embed any sort of anxiety about her body’s performance into her narration of the chase beyond her fleeting thought that “[m]y skin is tight with fear” (STB 79). Nevertheless, Esch does incorporate into the scene subtle descriptions of the chase that evoke a group of slaves being trailed by their master’s dog.18 As she watches Big Henry carry Junior on his back, Esch realizes, “[Junior] knows this frantic run before this ruinous dog” (80), as if to suggest that his flight from a trailing dog is a rehearsed act that has spanned decades, even centuries. Moreover, as the white neighbors’ dog returns home after encountering China, Esch describes him as “limping like his

17 Young’s analysis, found in her book entitled On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays, examines transformations of the body and consciousness that occur during pregnancy.
18 See Brown’s “Figuring Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Bare Life’ in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker” for an in-depth reading of how Ward’s novel relies on “a longer genealogy of representation of the black body from slavery onwards” (3).
master, away to the pit and past” (82), again utilizing language that gestures towards this past era of slaves and masters.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, while Esch never overtly expresses her panic in this moment, the laden context of the moment invokes, by way of collective memory, a sense of terror as the dog “snaps and I swear I can feel his saliva on my legs” (80), and Esch’s disbelief in her body’s failure to execute the necessary task for her survival further intensifies this terror. She later tries to hide her transforming body from Skeetah when he asks why she ran slowly, demonstrating her shame that she let her family down. That Esch’s pregnancy heightens the threat endangering herself and her siblings suggests how African-American mothers beginning in the time of slavery have lamented their powerlessness within racist systems that impoverish their families and then criminalize their children for trying to survive.

At the same time that Esch’s surveillance of her pregnant body exposes her anxieties about her family’s poverty, her surveillance of China’s birth and mothering of her puppies exposes her anxiety about her powerlessness amidst the violence on the Pit. As mentioned previously, black mothers’ writing often laments the inevitability of violence against black sons and daughters. In “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine writes about a friend who constantly fears losing her son. As Rankine notes that “mourning lived in real time inside her and her son’s reality,” she concludes, “We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here” (145, 147). Whereas Esch’s mother knew how to care for her family members in the aftermath of any violence, Esch’s fear that she cannot counteract the normalized violence of the Pit materializes in

\textsuperscript{19} In her introduction to The Fire This Time, Ward conflates the various iterations of racialized violence throughout history: “Replace ropes with bullets. Hound dogs with German shepherds. A gray uniform with a bulletproof vest. Nothing is new” (6).
her scrutiny of China, as she projects onto Skeetah’s dog her fear that she cannot keep her family intact. Esch’s anxieties do not emerge right away, as she vacillates between observing China’s strength and how China sometimes directs that strength as violence onto her own puppies. In the novel’s first chapter, Esch expresses some apprehension about whether China will be a nurturing mother, as she suggests, “I don’t know what I thought she would do once she had them: sit on them and smother them maybe. Bite them. Turn their skulls to bits of bone and blood” (STB 17). Here, Esch’s understanding of China’s strength prompts her to envision the dog as a “smothering” mother who not only fails to protect her puppies but actually endangers them herself. Later, as Esch watches China’s puppies pull at her breasts, she comments on the toll of motherhood on the mother’s body, saying,

> Her eyelids droop, and suddenly she looks tired. Her breasts are all swollen, and the puppies pull at them. She is a weary goddess.

> She is a mother so many times over. (40)

Whereas Esch does not view China as a mother when she threatens her puppies’ well-being, China becomes a mother “so many times over” in her weakness. Esch’s readings of China, then, equate weakness with mothering and accordingly gesture towards Esch’s fear that her own weaknesses will fail her family.

As Esch repeatedly scrutinizes how China mothers her puppies amidst the illnesses they contract, Esch herself mostly remains a passive bystander to the moments

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20 It is worth noting that Esch similarly uses her interaction with the story of Medea, via a school assignment, to play out her anxieties about her relationship with Manny, the father of her child. Various times throughout the novel, Esch compares her love for Manny to the fierce love Medea has for Jason. The tension between Jason and Medea’s brother, a quarrel which ends in Medea killing her brother, becomes a site for Esch to address her own shame that Manny threatens, rather than assimilates into, her family. As Clark suggests, “Esch views herself through the lens of Greek mythology” (349).
that her brothers and father incur injuries and sicknesses. In fact, Ward literalizes Esch’s detachment from the conflict her brothers experience in the various times that Esch observes her brothers’ fights with each other or their father through a window. It seems only natural that Esch would question what role she plays in caring for her kin in these moments, yet her anxiety about her family’s circumstances and her role within them only manifests via China in the chapter that interweaves the moment that the tractor slices off Daddy’s fingers and the moment that China kills one of her own. Here, Esch watches as Randall helps his father navigate the tractor towards the chicken coop at the same time that Skeetah tries to feed China; just as Randall mishears his father and slips the tractor into gear, a mistake that costs their father his fingers, China snaps at one of her puppies, whipping and flinging him through the air. The narrative technique that fuses these instances conflates their violence and bloody aftermath. Just as the family cannot prevent the violence of their machine, China enacts violence on one of her own: “The blood on Daddy’s shirt is the same color as the pulpy puppy in China’s mouth” (*STB* 129). Again, Esch remains a bystander in both of these situations. Whereas Esch remembers earlier her mother “push[ing] and blow[ing]” at wounds so that they “wouldn’t hurt anymore” (12), the bloody outcome of these moments—Daddy’s lost fingers and the puppy’s lost life—leaves no room for reparation. Nevertheless, in an instant of uncharacterized expression, she frantically imagines asking China, “*Is this what motherhood is?*” (130). The fusion of these two moments with Esch’s attempt to understand motherhood—her own and China’s—suggests that Esch doubts the influence of motherhood within an environment of violence. That is, as Esch watches her family’s inability to interact with each other and their environment without bloodshed, China’s murder of her own offspring manifests
Esch’s fear that motherhood cannot prevent such violence, that the weight of such an oppressive environment might even spur family members to turn on each other. Accordingly, the cultural familiarity of the ubiquitous poverty and normalized violence on the Pit places Esch among a company of black mothers who frantically question how to mother their children within such a threatening system.

**Esch’s Mothering**

At the same time that the precariousness of her life, with its poverty and violence, heightens Esch’s anxiety about becoming a mother, the same factors prompted her to assume a maternal role for her brothers and father after her mother’s death. In her memoir, Ward shares how her mother became a maternal figure for her siblings while her grandmother worked numerous jobs to support the family alone:

> [T]he role of mothering the seven children fell to my mother. . . . So my mother learned to cook before she turned ten, and spent the rest of her preteen and teenage years preparing large breakfasts of oatmeal and biscuits, and larger dinners of red beans and rice. When my four uncles, the youngest of the seven children, broke my grandmother’s rules my mother whipped them with switches peeled from trees in the yard. She and her two sisters washed loads of laundry and hung them out to dry on lines stretched across the length of the swampy backyard. (*MWR* 18-19)

Her memoir returns time and again to the idea that black women, especially in the rural South, often have to bear the burdens of mothering their siblings, their siblings’ children, or even children from the community because of the prevalence of violence, criminalization, and abandonment within black families. While Ward’s own mother
recognized the role she held within her family, Esch, whose list of obligations mirrors that of Ward’s mother, never mentions how her family’s circumstances dictate her role within the family. Rather, the ubiquity of the poverty and violence on the Pit renders commonplace, and consequently invisible, the work that Esch does to sustain her family. That is, at the same time that Esch worries about becoming a mother, her mothering of her siblings and father is both wholly routine and absolutely crucial for maintaining even the precarious existence they do have.

In the few memories that Esch provides from the time directly following her mother’s death, we can see how she immediately undertook her mother’s duties and has managed them for the seven years since. In one of these flashbacks, she recounts how her father almost immediately passed on the responsibilities of taking care of Junior to her and Randall. Esch and Randall prepared his bottles, fed and held him, while their father channeled his grief into drinking and preparing for storms (STB 91). In this manner, Esch, with the help of Mudda Ma’am, mothers Junior from his birth. Moreover, just as Esch’s mother tended to her children’s bodily needs, Esch adopts the role of soothing, nourishing, and protecting her family members following her mother’s demise. She checks on Skeetah every night that he sleeps in the shed. She continues to search for eggs in her mother’s absence and cooks meals for her siblings and father. She dresses Skeetah’s wound after he scrapes his side against the barn window, and she cares for her incapacitated father after his injury. All of these moments replicate almost precisely how her own mother tended to her and her brothers’ ill or injured bodies. In fact, Esch also possesses a keen awareness of her siblings’ bodies, or a maternal instinct of sorts: she recognizes when Junior gets a haircut and when Skeetah showers, and in a particularly
poignant interaction between Esch and Skeetah, she notices that his “shirt is black, so what is wet on it is sweat. It could not be blood. I would know” (*STB* 137). Here, she insinuates, without explaining how, that she can intuit when her kinfolk hurt and bleed. That Esch fails to realize how she already performs the role that she fears seems only natural, then, for her motherwork has comprised a significant portion of her life.

As a side note, it is also interesting to consider how Randall acts as the family’s paternal figure in the midst of their father’s misdirected, debilitating grief. He, too, learns how to care for baby Junior, and seven years removed from his mother’s death, he protects and punishes Junior, prepares the house for the hurricane, and worries that the family does not have enough food to endure the storm. Particularly in the moments that Randall escorts his father to the hospital and feeds him after his accident, the text even positions Randall as the father and Claude the son: “Randall looked older than Daddy under the lights” (*STB* 132). Accordingly, *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates how a parent’s death and/or the prevalence of poverty can force young boys and girls such as Randall and Esch to assume parental duties while they are still children.

At the same time that Esch’s maternal duties emanate from her childhood, they also directly correlate with how the men in her family cope with their powerlessness. In *Men We Reaped*, Ward shares how, for generations, the mothers in her family and her community have worked to hold their families together amidst their husbands’ deaths, imprisonment, or abandonment. She writes, “I have always thought of my family as something of a matriarchy, since the women of my mother’s side have held my nuclear family and my immediate family and my extended family together through so much” (83). In *Salvage the Bones*, many of Esch’s memories represent her mother performing this
same work as she physically holds the family together, gathering her inebriated husband into her arms and embracing her children during Hurricane Elaine. Marotte reads the death of Esch’s mother as detrimental to the family’s cohesion, as she says, “The absence of this maternal figure, who clearly served as the cohesive force of the family, is profound and evidenced in the specific and oftentimes misguided ways the family members seek comfort. They have lost their center” (“Pregnancies” 177). However, the Batiste siblings mostly function as a unit—arguably because of the loss of their mother and the absence of their father—and Esch serves as the linchpin, the mother’s embrace, that holds together the family.

Her gravity within the family is none more apparent than in her relationship with Skeetah, for he, more than either of Esch’s other brothers, imperils their coherence as a family. Throughout the novel, Skeetah courts danger: he chews razors, frequents dogfights, and repeatedly steals in order to provide for China and her puppies. His behaviors frequently isolate him from the family, as Esch notes, “Before China had these puppies, I’d go days without seeing him. Days before I’d be walking through the woods . . . and I’d stumble on Skeetah, training China to attack and bite and lock on with an old bike tire or a rope” (STB 60). The resemblance between Skeetah and Ward’s father is undeniable, as Men We Reaped articulates how black men often seek freedom beyond their families in a futile attempt to escape their powerlessness. About her father, Ward writes,

This tradition of men leaving their families here seems systemic, fostered by endemic poverty. Sometimes color seems an accidental factor, but then it doesn’t, especially when one thinks of the forced fracturing of families that the earliest
African Americans endured under the yoke of slavery. Like for many of the young Black men in my community across generations, the role of being a father and a husband was difficult for my father to assume. He saw a world of possibility outside the confines of the family, and he could not resist the romance of that. 

(MWR 131)

She includes numerous examples of her father’s affairs, motorcycles, and pit bulls that evidence how her father sought freedom beyond his family and within danger, and the very yearning for freedom that Skeetah has is, according to Ward, the reason her father abandoned his family.

In the manner that Ward’s mother worked to foster a sense of family despite the fragile dynamics within their home, Esch alone seems to possess the capability to keep Skeetah connected to the family. Her actions repeatedly keep Skeetah within the family’s fold when he threatens to leave or succumb to the violence that surrounds them. Even while his devotion to China jeopardizes his presence in his family, Esch checks on him at night and helps him care for the puppies. She listens for the moments that he needs to open up. Most notably, Esch embraces him after the hurricane, as she attempts to console his crushing grief after China disappears: “I squeezed. With my whole body, I squeezed. I could hold him together, but he jerked so hard it felt like he was trying to shake himself apart, separate at the knuckles, pop loose his ribs, dislocate his shoulders, and dislodge his knees: shudder into nothing, a pile of skin and bone and limp muscle. No Skeet” (STB 238). In the moments before Skeetah separates from his family to search for China, Esch refuses to let her brother’s body “shudder into nothing”; her maternal touch attempts to rectify the violence of their society and environment. The novel concludes by literalizing
Skeetah’s gaze away from the family. As the siblings sit around a fire on the Pit, Esch shares how “Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah, and Skeetah will watch none of us” (258). When myriad external forces literally pull and push against Skeetah, Esch watches over him, ensuring he does not stray too far from his family. While Esch’s anxieties, as unearthed by her pregnancy, evidence the physical and psychological burdens of motherhood in a society that perpetuates violence and poverty within black communities, the same violence and poverty force her to assume the maternal role left void by her mother’s death. So, while she possesses strength within this role, the ubiquity of her motherwork renders it, for her, nothing more than “the only thing I can do” (206).

Reimagining the Black Matriarch

Similarly to Maud Martha’s presentation of the protagonist’s second pregnancy, Salvage the Bones concludes with Esch’s assertion of her motherhood. After the Batistes, excluding Skeetah, have lodged with Big Henry’s family, the siblings return to the Pit, or what remains of it, to check on Skeetah. As Esch watches Skeetah watching for China, she thinks,

China. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister.

In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence.

21 Though the novel concludes by leaving us questioning China’s—and consequently Skeetah’s—fate, Esch and Skeetah make an appearance in Ward’s next novel, Sing. Unburied, Sing, that suggests the strength of Esch’s maternal embrace. As Leonie and her children return from picking up her boyfriend from Parchman, Leonie observes, “Two people walk in the distance, and as we cruise through the green tunnel, I see a man, short and muscle, who leads a black dog by a chain. And next to him, a skinny little woman with a sable, coily cloud of hair that moves like a kaleidoscope of butterflies. It’s not until we’re right up on them that I see who it is. Skeetah and Eschelle, a brother and sister from the neighborhood. The siblings walk in sync, both of them bouncing. Esch says something, and Skeetah laughs” (197).
She will know that I am a mother. (STB 258).

Here, Esch claims the role she has long avoided, and she does so in a moment that renders her the “sister” of the tenaciously strong China. Unlike the ambiguity clouding the announcement of Maud Martha’s pregnancy, Esch’s assertion that she is a mother emanates from her strength, as she has “kept watch” and “fought” during and after the storm. Those scholars who have examined Esch as a mother position China’s absence following the storm as the catalyst for Esch’s declaration. Clark writes, “Leaving behind a ghostly vacuum, China provides a feminine space that Esch is now ready to inhabit, occupied previously by both China and Esch’s mother” (356), while Marotte emphasizes how the simultaneous destruction and renewal generated by Hurricane Katrina births Esch as a mother (“Pregnancies” 183). However, even though her declaration signals her acceptance of her role as mother, it is important to note that the markers of her newfound acknowledgment find their roots in ways that Esch has performed motherhood ever since a different, though equally calamitous, storm: the death of her mother.

Perhaps the most pronounced indication of Esch’s new mindset comes when she proposes names for her child. She shares, “If it is a girl, I will name her after my mother: Rose. Rose Temple Batiste” and “If it is a boy, I will name it after Skeetah. Jason. Jason Aldon Batiste” (STB 247, 248). Here, Esch shifts from her past anxiety about her body and her incapacity to mother to planning for the future and for the baby that will be hers. Esch’s chosen names for her baby demonstrate her commitment to honoring her family through her child, as well as her enduring efforts to preserve her family’s heritage of resilient men and women. However, even in the novelty of this moment, these names are not the first that Esch has bestowed. Before Skeetah kills the first puppy that displays...
symptoms of parvovirus, Esch asks if he has named her. When he says no, she names the puppy “Nella” (50). While Esch asks herself, “What’s the use of naming her to die?” (50), Esch’s insistence that the puppy has a name even despite her ensuing death is the core of motherwork. While the conclusion of the novel brings Esch’s realization that she can bring life into her pitiful world, we have seen for the entire novel how she finds value even in those lives that will succumb to the violence—the deaths, sickness, and storms—of her environment.

Even though Esch’s assertion of her motherhood allows for the most hopeful reading of black motherhood in all three novels, the circumstances of this assertion remind us of the wounds, hunger, and destruction that prompt her strength. As Esch and her siblings sit outside their destroyed home with just the clothes on their backs and scarce food supplies, the novel concludes with the most confident assertion of motherhood that Esch offers. While it may seem a contradiction that Esch finds motherhood an empowering role at the moment that her family has literally nothing, I think it could not be any other way, for it marries her strength with the devastation her family endures. In her memoir, Ward writes,

But as an adult, I see my mother’s legacy anew. I see how all the burdens she bore, the burdens of her history and identity and of our country’s history and identity, enabled her to manifest her greatest gifts. My mother had the courage to look at four hungry children and find a way to fill them. My mother had the strength to work her body to its breaking point to provide for herself and her children. My mother had the resilience to cobble together a family from the broken bits of another. (MWR 250)
If *Salvage the Bones* evidences the maternal strength necessary in such environments, it also evidences how the burdens of motherhood can literally kill these women. At the same time, if *Salvage the Bones* signifies the precariousness of living black and poor and of mothering within such a meager existence, it also reveals how maternal strength can emanate from living in an environment and work to sustain families and communities. In the manner that it chronicles Esch’s fears and failures as well as her maternal strength, Ward’s novel answers the call that Washington put forth decades ago for stories by black women about “real black women,” stories that contain “the entire range and spectrum of the experiences of black women” (*Black-Eyed Susans* xxxii).
CONCLUSION

Black Motherhood and the Project of Freedom

Over the past few years, a group of black mothers identified as the “Mothers of the Movement” has made headlines for their critical role in fueling the Black Lives Matter movement. Women such as Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, and Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland,22 comprise this group that formed as a result of the women’s shared experience of burying a child due to systemic racial violence. These women have garnered attention within the public eye, as they accompanied Beyoncé to the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards and Janelle Monáe to the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, and a few of them even appeared in a video associated with Beyoncé’s album “Lemonade.” At the same time, they have also gained an unprecedented political presence in their affiliation with Hillary Clinton’s campaign during the 2016 presidential election. After a meeting with the presidential candidate brought these women together, the group campaigned for Clinton and endorsed her at the Democratic National Convention in July 2016. As evidenced by their epithet, the publicity surrounding these women largely focuses on their roles as mothers. In a video showing the meeting the presidential candidate had with these women, Clinton advises them to join their stories into a collective voice that says, “[W]e are citizens, we are mothers, we lost children. This is not only wrong, it is unacceptable” (“Mothers of the Movement at DNC 2016” 00:01:05-00:01:20). Furthermore, when these women spoke at the DNC, they returned time and again to the idea that their role as mothers necessitates their political activism. As a facet of their endorsement, they also stressed Clinton’s

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22 See Will Drabold’s “Meet the Mothers Of The Movement Speaking at the Democratic Convention” for a full list of these women, as well as the experiences that prompted their political activism.
capacity as a mother herself to empathize with them. Some, such as Lucy McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, have even chosen to run for public office in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 election.

These women’s work emulates a description of those “who still live” in Ward’s memoir, where she writes,

We who still live do what we must. . . . We honor anniversaries of deaths by cleaning graves and sitting next to them before fires, sharing food with those who will not eat again. We raise children and tell them other things about who they can be and what they are worth: to us, everything. We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die. We survive; we are savages. (MWR 250)

Just like black women of generations past, the Mothers of the Movement continue to perform motherwork by honoring the legacies of their slain children. At the DNC, Lucy McBath said, “I am still Jordan Davis’s mother. His life ended the day that he was shot and killed for playing loud music, but my job as his mother didn’t. I still wake up every day thinking about how to parent him, how to protect him and his legacy, how to ensure his death doesn’t overshadow his life” (“Mothers of the Movement at DNC 2016” 00:07:40-00:08:15). Moreover, the Mothers of the Movement continue to embody strong motherhood in their work to ensure other children evade the fate of their own children. Just as Sybrina Fulton voiced during the video shown at the DNC that “I can’t help Trayvon at this time, but there are other Trayvon Martins that I can help” (“Mothers of the Movement at DNC 2016” 00:01:30-35), these women replicate the work of “othermothers” in that their activism is a type of “community-based child care” (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 179). In other words, these women utilize their voices and their
unique experiences as mothers to toil for a safer environment for other children in their communities. In their transformation of grief into activism and their concern for others’ children following the deaths of their own, these women epitomize the strong black mother that repeatedly appears in black women’s writing.

Despite these women’s political presence—their unprecedented platform to articulate their own stories—the Mothers of the Movement also epitomize the ambivalent representations of motherhood in this thesis in the hardships that honed their strength. These women repeatedly articulate the pain that fuels their political activism. In a letter that Sybrina Fulton penned to the parents of Michael Brown upon his death, Fulton writes, “Our children are our future so whenever any of our children – black, white, brown, yellow, or red – are taken from us unnecessarily, it causes a never-ending pain that is unlike anything I could have imagined experiencing” (Fulton). As evidenced by numerous black women’s texts that share similar sentiments, grief and loss are inextricably linked with black motherhood. Moreover, even as many of the Mothers of the Movement voiced their gratitude for the opportunity to speak at the DNC, they also shared how they do not look upon their participation in this movement favorably. Lucy McBath urged the audience to vote for Clinton “so that this club of heart-broken mothers stops growing” (“Mothers of the Movement DNC 2016” 00:10:11-00:10:33), and Sybrina Fulton expressed, “I am an unwilling participant in this movement. I would not have signed up for this . . . But I am here today for my son Trayvon Martin” (00:10:52-

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23 Interestingly, in the 2016 election, black women voted as a group more so than any other demographic, as if to say that these women, by and large, share concerns as well as visions for how to address those concerns. A CNN exit poll reveals that 94 percent of black women voters cast a ballot for Hillary Clinton, while the next highest unanimity among a demographic was black male voters, 82 percent of whom voted for Clinton (“Exit Polls”).
Accordingly, these women find that their strength has emerged in response to the uninvited circumstances of their lives, those that leave them childless and mourning.

In the same manner that the Mothers of the Movement esteem their role as mothers while lamenting the circumstances that dictate their mothering, the novels analyzed in this thesis examine the circumscriptions that limit black women’s experiences of motherhood. In Brooks’s *Maud Martha*, Maud finds that her search for fulfillment outside of her familial relationships—and more particularly her relationships with her mother and her daughter—is denied due to her relative invisibility, as a black woman, within society. The text’s ambivalence, then, concerns the constrictions on her identity that relegate her to motherhood and motherhood alone. Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* similarly utilizes a host of mothers to evidence how the controlling narratives about them fail to attend to the immense burdens—the financial and relational strains—they face. Finally, Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* quite literally represents how a hardship—in this case, one of the worst hurricanes to devastate the United States—births a woman who claims her maternal strength. Despite Esch’s concluding optimism, the body of this novel captures Esch’s ambivalence towards the precariousness of her role and of her family’s survival. While each novel offers some hope for more expansive definitions and experiences of black motherhood and womanhood, none of them allows that black women will achieve these more diverse experiences if these women do not define for themselves their identities and the terms on which they mother. Accordingly, these novels are, quite simply, revolutionary as they cultivate a tradition of black women doing just that: controlling how they experience and represent the nuances of black motherhood.
In 2018, the unique and ubiquitous suffering of black mothers remains as pressing as ever. Just days before the submission of this thesis, *The New York Times Magazine* released an article entitled “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis” that addresses the staggeringly high rates of infant and maternal mortalities within the nation’s African-American population. The article follows a young black mother, Simone Landrum, who finds her voice neglected by doctors and consequently almost dies during her third childbirth experience. When she becomes pregnant again, she seeks the aid of a doula, another black woman, who cares for her and accompanies her to the hospital when she gives birth. The doula becomes an advocate for Landrum, offering comfort when Landrum faces prejudice during her interactions with hospital staff and allowing space for Landrum to articulate her grief, anxiety, and pain when others will not. This comfort and space prove revolutionary for Landrum, as she births a healthy baby with the help of her doula. The timing of this article is critical for a number of reasons. First, it argues that, even in 2018, the intersecting forces of racism, sexism, and poverty can prevent black women from becoming mothers at all. Villarosa writes,

> The reasons for the black-white divide in both infant and maternal mortality have been debated by researchers and doctors for more than two decades. But recently there has been growing acceptance of what has largely been, for the medical establishment, a shocking idea: For black women in America, an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism can create a kind of toxic psychological stress, resulting in conditions – including hypertension and pre-eclampsia – that lead directly to higher rates of infant and maternal death. And that societal racism is further expressed in a pervasive, longstanding racial bias in
health care – including the dismissal of legitimate concerns and symptoms – that can help explain poor birth outcomes even in the case of black women with the most advantages. (Villarosa)

So, the need for black women to define and control their mothering is as pressing now as it was when Brooks first published *Maud Martha*. At the same time, it also evidences how revolutionary the act of black mothers’ claiming space for their own and others’ diverse voices and stories can be. As the article shows, black women’s camaraderie does not necessarily eliminate the oppression they face, but it can reclaim motherhood as an empowering and fulfilling role for black women.
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