REVIEWS

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Carr, Nicole. *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy*. Routledge, 2025. 176 pages. E-book. ISBN: 9781032719993.

Among recent studies that discuss various aspects of Black feminism, of motherhood, and reproductive justice, such as *Black Women Taught Us: An Intimate History of Black Feminism* (2024) by Jenn M. Jackson, *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (2021) by Kyla Schuller, *Refiguring Motherhood Beyond Biology* (2023), edited by Valerie Renegar and Kirsti Cole, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (2020) by Mikki Kendall, and *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017) by Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, Nicole Carr's book offers a detailed examination of the multilayered identity of African-American women by exploring various facets of the concept of mothering, analyzed both in the American society and in African-American literature.

In the introduction to the book, Carr states that "as a set of sustained practices, Black feminist mothering extends caregiving beyond that of one's children to include the nurturing of one's self and community" (1); therefore, the goal of the volume is to "highlight the critical care work necessary for nourishing ourselves and our relationships with other Black folks" (2). The author considers the "Black maternal" "a radically imaginative space" (5); consequently, each of the six chapters interweaves past and present experiences of female African-American activists, writers, and politicians, with pertinent examples from literary works, peppered with Carr's own personal experience, in order to explore the "manifestations, possibilities, and contradictions" of the "Black maternal" (5).

In the first two chapters, "Riding with Death: Assata Shakur, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Revolutionary Black Matrilineal Consciousness" and "The Motherwork Continues: Merciful Mothering in the Black Lives Matter Era," Carr examines the impact of Black mothering in two different contexts: Black mothers fighting the healthcare system (in the first chapter), and the continuous struggle of Black parents to raise their children in a society ruled by white supremacy (in the second chapter). "Motherwork" is the key concept that threads through both chapters, juxtaposed to "state-sanctioned reproductive violence" (13), as exemplified by the assiduous political activism of Fannie Lou Hamer and Assata Shakur, and encompassing "the negotiations Black parents are forced to make when confronting the threat of reproductive violence" (34) posed by white supremacy, as illustrated in three literary works by contemporary African-American authors (in the second chapter). In order to underscore the significance "of reproductive politics to the Black freedom struggle" (13), in the first chapter, Carr examines Hamer's and Shakur's experiences with the American healthcare system, pointing out the devastating consequences of past and present neglectful and discriminatory attitudes displayed by healthcare workers when confronted with serious pregnancy-related issues of African-American women. Furthermore, Carr connects the experiences of the two political activists with the experiences depicted in literary and cultural pieces by African-American women authors, such as Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Nina Simone, and Shakur, whose autobiography (1988) represents, according to Carr, "a Black maternal manifesto" because "Shakur's visions for freedom cohere around pregnancy, birth, and reproductive justice" (15).

The keywords in the second chapter are "motherwork," "mercy" and "reproductive violence," with "mercy" signifying, in the case of Black parents, "the relentless pursuit of tenderness amid American white supremacist capitalism" (33). In her minute analysis of *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison, *The Known World* (2003) by Edward P. Jones, and *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-

2017) by N. K. Jemisin, Carr closely associates "motherwork" with "deathscapes," which she defines as spaces "whether within the holds of slaving ships, forced work camps, or over-policed ghettos," where "Black parents operating under these oppressive forces are stirred by an anticipatory grief compelling them to harm their children" (32-33). In this context, "motherwork," which refers to "work done on behalf of one's own biological children, or for the children of one's own racial ethnic community, or to preserve the earth for children who are yet unborn" (33), becomes "the kind of maternal strategizing" necessary to support "the fight to raise our children in these deathscapes" (33). In Jones' historical fiction, "an antebellum deathscape" is "responsible for severing the relationship between father and son" (36), while "the futuristic deathscape[s]" (40) of Jemisin's trilogy, "pervert the ethics of care between child and parent" (49). In the inescapable deathscapes of Jemisin's trilogy and Morrison's novel, the mothers' decisions to ensure their daughters' survival are misunderstood by their offspring, thereby creating insurmountable emotional (and physical) gulfs.

The third and fourth chapters, "Sisters in Bloom: Tending to the Garden of Sisterhood" and "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: Sisterwork in the Time of Betty, Coretta, and Myrlie," revolve around the key concept of sisterwork, as a way of Black women supporting one another's work. In the third chapter, sisterwork refers to "the critical care work necessary for maintaining Black women's creative genius" (56). According to Carr, in order to facilitate this "care work," Black women developed an "'interstellar mother tongue' . . . unburdened by time and space," reflecting "Black women's collective need to be mothered by other Black women" (57). The author points out that African-American women's letters best reflect this type of "mother tongue." Therefore, Carr's thorough examination of the letter exchanges between poet Phillis Wheatley-Peters and Obour Tanner-Collins, the "president for the African Female Benevolent Society" (56) during the colonial era, those between Zora Neale Hurston and the two cousins Dorothy West and Helene Johnson in the 1920s and early 1930s, and those between Audre Lorde and Pat

Barker in the 1970s and 1980s, highlights the importance of the emotional support offered by Black women to encourage the creative endeavors of other Black women.

Starting from Lorde's poignant assertion that "we can learn to mother ourselves" (82), in the fourth chapter, Carr explores the revolutionary potential of sisterwork by looking at how Black women created relationships with each other as "an antidote to the lack of mothering [they] receive from society at large" (81). To this end, she examines the development of the friendship between Coretta Scott King, Myrlie Evers-Williams, and Betty Shabazz, widowed during the Civil rights era, to demonstrate how "sisterwork" combines "mothering, caring, and nurturing of Black women" (82). Carr discusses the gradual development of their friendship in private spaces, different from the public images they chose to uphold as a way of conforming to the societal expectations as "movement widows" (87). Moreover, as Carr points out, the close friendship between the three women, as well as the friendship between Lorde and Parker, which weaves through both chapters, allowed them to create a "womanspace" (91) meant to offer them emotional support and solace, in the case of King, Evers-Williams, and Shabazz, and a space to foster Lorde's and Parker's creative potential.

The last two chapters, "I Am Not My Brother's Keeper: Black Women M(o)thering Themselves" and "I Am Not Your Mammy: Kamala Harris and the Politics of Refusal," address issues of gender between Black women and Black men (in the fifth chapter), and the dis(connection) of Black female politicians from the pressing problems of the African-American community in recent decades. The fifth chapter is built around the key term "patriarchal stealth," which refers to Black men being exempt from any responsibility out of an "overabundance of concern" (101). Thus, Carr aims to "explore gendered ideologies of victimhood as a means of providing . . . Black women and girls, the mercy denied to them in life and death" (101). In this context, the author analyzes Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), while contextualizing Megan Thee Stallion's fight for justice, after being shot at by Tory

Lanez, with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as with Hurston's own experience with violence inflicted by a male partner. According to Carr, the public refusal of the community to acknowledge Black women as victims creates a "mother wound" (118), which, in her opinion, could be healed by publicly naming Black women who had been victims of violence, as Megan Thee Stallion did after the shooting, during a 2021 performance, thereby "participat[ing] in the 'wake work' central to Black rituals of mourning" (120).

In the last chapter, Carr looks at three important Black female politicians, Shirley Chisholm, Condoleezza Rice, and Kamala Harris, and the ways in which "their political maneuvering rejects traditional conventions surrounding Black women's labor" (127). The author discusses two novels by Morrison (*Tar Baby* and *Sula*) to exemplify "Black women's complex humanity" (127), with a view to showing how the three female politicians, who "sometimes played the role of token or engaged in harmful acts against Black and disadvantaged people," "navigat[ed] life as flawed individuals, swayed by ambition and yearnings for power and belonging" (127). For instance, while Carr examines Harris' rise to power, her "emotionally distant attitude," and the fact that she was "wholly disinterested in publicly performing a maternal persona" (a mammy)" (148-149), which might have contributed to her unpopularity, the author notes that Harris' early withdrawal from the 2020 presidential election, although she might have been "the most experienced person for the job, . . . exposes America's penchant for white male patriarchs [Joseph R. Biden, in this case] and calling on Black women to perform democracy's dirty work" (153).

By weaving together various aspects of mothering, both as an individual and a collective endeavor of and for Black women, during different key time periods in African-American history, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power era, and the Black Lives Matter movement, with relevant examples from African-American literary works, Carr's detailed, thought-provoking, and well-documented study emphasizes the crucial role played by past

and present Black women in creating much-needed support networks for the emotional and creative empowerment of generations of African-American women. In addition, the author's choice to include her own experiences as a Black daughter, mother, woman, and educator functions as a bridge that unites the past and the present in order to underscore the significance of mothering for Black women today, as well as to signal the need to continue the process. With a nod to the future, Carr concludes her book by suggesting that Harris' loss of the 2024 presidential election signifies "a symbolic call for Black women to harvest our energies, labors, and talents for a season where those most in need of saving are ourselves" (156). Overall, scholars in African-American studies and intersectional gender studies, as well as students, will find this book a valuable source for further research.

Works Cited

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