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# The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood

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**THE POWER TO OVERCOME: THE RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCY OF BLACK  
MOTHERHOOD**

A thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In  
English  
by

Nathan Full

Approved by

Dr. Kristen Lillvis, Committee Chairperson

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Marshall University  
December 2017

## APPROVAL OF THESIS

We, the faculty supervising the work of Nathan Full, affirm that the thesis, *The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Department of English and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.



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## ABSTRACT

Motherhood is not a monolithic experience. The intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class are integral facets that influence and control how one practices maternity, especially in a white hegemonic state. Further, control and choice serve as contributing factors, influencing the level of control women have over entering maternity and how a mother claims ties to her offspring. With these intersectional factors and control measures combined, motherhood is a complicated matter, one that influences how women practice maternity. The practice of motherhood is influenced by race, with black women experiencing a historical struggle in their relationships with motherhood. These difficulties include how one enters maternity, specifically how it assists or detracts from their social standing in societies that disempower women, the ways in which black mothers lay claim to both their bodies and their offspring, and the ways the white hegemony and some black scholars have differently constructed black matriarchies. It is the purpose of this thesis to not only uncover new analyses of four novels depicting black motherhood but also introduce theoretical terms to further uncover the multiplicities of black motherhood. To discuss the different facets of black motherhood and how black women, specifically in texts that occur in different time periods—the future, the colonial era, and both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States—practice maternity under circumstances influenced by dominating power structures, my thesis incorporates Octavia E. Butler’s *Patternmaster* (1976), Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Crystal Wilkinson’s *The Birds of Opulence* (2015). These texts work together to uncover the central elements of this thesis—choice, ownership of kin, and the shared history of black matriarchies.



## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Sethe, in her self-narrated chapter of *Beloved*, says, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing” (Morrison 200). Sethe, a former slave who was denied a relationship with her mother and later experiences a complicated relationship with maternity herself, lays claim to the mysterious figure she believes is the mature ghost of her deceased daughter. This claim of ownership is significant. It signifies not only Sethe’s anguish but also the complications experienced by black mothers. In a white hegemony, especially one interested in controlling black women’s sexuality—both their bodies and offspring—and the cultural narratives of black motherhood, there is a struggle for oppressed black mothers to gain ownership over themselves so that they may practice maternity in ways suitable to their needs. Considering her struggle for autonomy, going from enslaved to free but having to sacrifice her child to do so, Sethe’s quote serves as an inspiration for this thesis, as it speaks to ownership of kin, choice, and a shared history, specifically one of not forgetting one’s own mother. The themes of choice, ownership, and shared history work together to uncover the multiplicity of black motherhood, pushing against hegemonic and monolithic beliefs on what it means to be a mother. These themes are discussed through the implementation of terminology to situate modes of motherhood while examining the social context of living in a race-conscious state.

Motherhood is not a monolithic experience. The intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class are integral facets that influence and control how one practices maternity, especially in a white hegemonic state. Further, control and choice serve as contributing factors, influencing the level of control women have over entering maternity and how a mother claims ties to her offspring. With these intersectional factors and control measures combined, motherhood is a

complicated matter, one that influences how women practice maternity. The practice of motherhood is influenced by race, with black women experiencing a historical struggle in their relationships with motherhood. These difficulties include how one enters maternity, specifically how it assists or detracts from their social standing in societies that disempower women, the ways in which black mothers lay claim to both their bodies and their offspring, and the ways the white hegemony and some black scholars have differently constructed black matriarchies. It is the purpose of this thesis to not only uncover new analyses of four novels depicting black motherhood but also introduce theoretical terms to further uncover the multiplicities of black motherhood. To discuss the different facets of black motherhood and how black women, specifically in texts that occur in different time periods—the future, the colonial era, and both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States—practice maternity under circumstances influenced by dominating power structures, my thesis incorporates Octavia E. Butler’s *Patternmaster* (1976), Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Crystal Wilkinson’s *The Birds of Opulence* (2015). These texts work together to uncover the central elements of this thesis—choice, ownership of kin, and the shared history of black matriarchies.

To work towards a clearer understanding of black motherhood and the aspects of autonomy, control, and familial structures, I present three theoretical terms—progressive motherhood, regressive motherhood, and fierce motherhood—as well as contend that black matriarchies are a shared history of experiences. The terms, as defined later in this introduction, work together to elucidate the disempowerment of black women and how black mothers in these specific texts work to move beyond subjugation. These theoretical terms are discussed to further articulate how black mothers resist oppressive power structures. The terms’ purpose is not to generalize the experiences of black mothers. Rather, the terms are implemented to highlight that

the oppression of black mothers does not stem from the Reconstruction era but is instead a longstanding historical struggle that stems from the start of the colonial era in the seventeenth century and extends into the future. It is the purpose of these terms to show that the subjugation and control of black women's bodies is a continuous struggle. Progressive and regressive motherhoods, fierce motherhood, and black matriarchies as a shared history are terms and ideas that aid this thesis's overall concern—that black motherhood is influenced by dominant power structures.

### **Black Motherhood's Terminology**

My first chapter, “Afrofuturist Feminist: Amber's Progressive Motherhood in Octavia E. Butler's *Patternmaster*,” discusses the intersections of race, sexuality, and class through Afrofuturistic, queer, and critical race theoretical lenses, specifically focusing on Amber's decision to have a child with Teray (a white man), which is done to secure her social standing in her futuristic feudal society. Here, I introduce and define two terms, progressive and regressive motherhood, and offer nuanced understandings of both to avoid binary ways of thinking. Neither term is used to generalize a black woman's decision to enter maternity, but instead are incorporated to situate how maternity may impact the black mother. In turn, both progressive and regressive motherhood speak to choice, which serves as the chapter's overall theme—how a black mother can choose to enter pregnancy to better fulfill her own wants, needs, and desires.

To situate that fulfillment of the mother's needs, progressive motherhood is the willful choice to enter pregnancy on the mother's own terms. The mother's decision is autonomous, with the choice of maternity having more than one possible aim. One aim of progressive motherhood is the ability of the mother to claim ownership over her own body, meaning that she

controls her sexuality and reproductive abilities. This claim of ownership denies the influence of outside entities, meaning that the mother is the only person who makes the decision to enter maternity. Another aim of progressive motherhood is for the mother to ascertain or solidify her social standing and power. Progressive motherhood means that a woman may choose maternity to further her own powers. This mode of motherhood is applicable to *Patternmaster's* Amber in that producing offspring with Teray would create a lasting bond of power. By producing a future Patternmaster, Amber not only situates herself in a position of power just by association, she also creates her own terms—the right to her own House (a large tract of land and mansion comprised of the Housemaster's family, friends, and servants), to partake in queer nonmonogamous relationships, and to influence change within her society. This form of motherhood is about empowerment and control over one's own body. Simply, progressive motherhood does not sacrifice desire for power.

Conversely, regressive motherhood places the mother in a semi-dependent state, a situation influenced or exasperated by partners and/or children. Regressive motherhood is the partial removal of autonomy, and this state of dependence is influenced by the mother's respective situation. This dependence may stem from one or more of the following: domesticity, the care and needs of offspring, romantic partners, or maternal slavery. The lack of agency that results from these factors denotes a lack of choice, meaning that subjugation results from the absence of choice. When motherhood becomes regressive, forcing the mother to suppress her own interests and wants for her family, thus devaluing a woman's contributions outside the familial structure, a hierarchy of mothering is created. The maternal hierarchy places importance on a woman's ability to produce and nurture. Women's individuality and desires are placed at the bottom. As such, motherhood may be read as regressive if the mother's own wants and needs are

ignored for the sake of the larger family unit. Unlike progressive motherhood, regressive motherhood sacrifices both desire and power.

While the first chapter discusses the reasons why Amber decides to become a mother for her own betterment and elevated social status, chapter two, “‘She my daughter. She mine’: Fierce Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed*,” is concerned with the concept of fierce motherhood and how two black mothers claim not only their bodies but also their kin. Fierce motherhood is specifically applied to a neo-slave narrative and a speculative text that spans in time from late seventeenth century Africa to antebellum Louisiana due to the historical context of slavery. This emphasis on the period of the American slave trade highlights the disrupted bonds of ownership experienced by enslaved black women, over both their bodies and their children. The purpose of this chapter is to understand the measures the two black mothers take to gain what has been previously denied of them—their reproductive abilities and their children. Fierce motherhood, a term used specifically to describe the struggles of Sethe (*Beloved*) and Anyanwu (*Wild Seed*), is a claim of ownership a black mother makes for herself and her offspring. This claim, however, presents difficulties and creates complicated depictions of black maternity. The complications arise through the methods of fierce motherhood, like violence, negotiations of power, evasion, and isolation. The methods of fierce motherhood may appear severe, like Sethe who kills her oldest daughter so that the baby will not return to slavery, but these means are accomplished so that Sethe may protect her children. Further, Anyanwu, an African shapeshifter with an abnormal mortality, must evade Doro, a vampiric spirit capable of possessing human bodies who has forced Anyanwu into maternal enslavement, and disguise herself as a white plantation owner and present her kin as slaves, thus using a severe model of oppression to avoid the subjugation of both her body and her children. Fierce motherhood forces

the mothers to take extreme actions. As such, this denotes the driving force behind fierce motherhood—to love and protect offspring at all costs.

### **Matriarchies: A Shared Herstory**

Using Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) as inspiration, the third chapter, "A Shared Herstory: Black Matriarchy in Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*," works to uncover the conflicting portrayals of black motherhood and how said portrayals impact the black mother while also presenting black matriarchies as not destructive but instead as a familial structure of shared experiences through analysis of the Brown-Goode women in Wilkinson's novel. To accomplish this, black matriarchies and black motherhood are discussed through the conflicting portrayals from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist who positions black women as both emasculators and the destructive force of the black nuclear family, and what Hill Collins refers to as the "superstrong Black mother," the black mother who puts the needs of her family before her own, often to her detriment. These conflicting notions of black maternity ignore the multiplicity of black women and their historical struggle for autonomy. Both portrayals ultimately position black women in an unfair light due to the sacrifices that black women must make for their families, which is due in large part to the intersections of race, gender, and class. Rather than perpetuate an unjust representation of black mothers, the chapter proposes a different perspective—black matriarchies are comprised of shared experiences.

Shared experiences are the idea that an experience had by one female family member, like the grandmother, becomes a shared memory among the rest of the female family members, like mothers and daughters. These shared experiences assist in shaping how the women of the family view or understand a specific issue, like rape, premarital sex, or mental illness. This

notion of shared experiences, or a collective history, is inspired by the cover of *The Birds of Opulence*. Prominently featured is a Sankofa, “the image...of a bird with its head turned so that its beak touches its back. In Akan, the term and symbol mean *se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi* (it is no taboo to fetch something which has been forgotten)—return to the past in order to go forward” (Grayson 26). Sankofa symbolizes the ability to look back at the past so that one learns and does not do the same in the present or future. Keeping that image and its symbolism in mind, the third chapter’s purpose is to show a different perspective on black matriarchies, specifically that matriarchies are not destructive, but rather a connection of struggles and enlightenment.

To show the shared connection between Minnie Mae (great-grandmother), Tookie (grandmother), Lucy (daughter), and Yolanda (granddaughter), the four protagonists of *The Birds of Opulence*, three issues that particularly impact the Brown-Goode family are examined—rape, premarital sex, and mental illness. I outline the cultural construction of black female sexuality, specifically focusing on the white hegemony’s perpetuation of the hypersexualized black woman, and the impact mental illness has on both the person with the illness and the family. The analysis of these elements is used to contextualize Minnie’s disdain for premarital sex, the impact rape has on both Tookie (the victim) and the entire family, and how Yolanda learns to articulate her issues with mental health rather than suffer with an undiagnosed illness like Lucy, her mother. From this contextualization it is understood that the experiences of one woman, especially when higher on the hierarchy of the matriarchy, impacts and influences the social beliefs and actions of the female relatives who come after them. Here, black mothers are not positioned as submissive characters who subvert their families. Instead, black matriarchies

are understood for what they are—a collection of shared memories that influence not just one woman but many.

### **A New Perspective**

This thesis does not seek to offer easy answers. Instead, its purpose is to examine the multiplicity of black motherhood, thus rejecting the stereotypes and cultural understandings pertaining to black motherhood. Proposed throughout are new ways of examining black motherhood: as progressive or regressive, mothering so fiercely that one does whatever necessary to safeguard their body and children, and that black matriarchies are not the destructive force that Moynihan alleges. To accomplish this, new terminology is created to further situate the argument and make clear that the monolithic view of motherhood is not acceptable and needs to be further examined when applied with intersectionality.



## CHAPTER 1

### AFROFUTURIST FEMINIST: AMBER'S PROGRESSIVE MOTHERHOOD IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S *PATTERNMASTER*

Set in hierarchal societies spanning from seventeenth-century Africa to the distant future, Octavia E. Butler's *Patternist* series depicts complicated relationships with maternity, often presenting regressive motherhood among its female protagonists. Regressive motherhood, maternity that hinders the development or elevation of women, occurs frequently with Butler's female protagonists, with motherhood treated as a dutiful act by the series' societies. In the context of the *Patternist* series, maternity is an obligation to continue the mother's partner's lineage or the result of a maternal slavery, one that demands the continuation of results from years of genetic experimentation and cultivation. There is truth in Dorothy Allison's assertion that Butler's women are "always independent, stubborn, difficult, and insistent on trying to control, there is also the pervasiveness of maternity that in some ways subjugates the women," making childbearing an act of regression (471). Allison continues, "What drives me crazy about Butler's women is their attitude: the decisions they make, the things they do in order to protect and nurture their children—and the assumption that children and family always comes first" (471). This regression is important in understanding how the *Patternist*'s women function.

In this chapter, I analyze progressive and regressive motherhood in the *Patternist* series to argue that *Patternmaster*'s Amber, the novel's sole biracial and openly queer character, uses motherhood to elevate her status and makes an autonomous decision to reproduce to aid her status in the Pattern's hierarchal society. I contend that Amber's maternal decision makes her an Afrofuturistic feminist in that her decision to bear white male Teray's offspring gives her a leadership role in her futuristic society, particularly as black female empowerment is a goal of

Afrofuturism, an artistic and literary movement that involves speculative fiction and non-Western beliefs to reimagine the past and create an inclusive, equal future where black people play key roles (Womack 9). I argue that by making the decision to enter motherhood, historically something that black women have not always been allowed to do, Amber makes a revolutionary decision that enables her to have children for her own progression. Considering tactics for freedom against the white hegemony and the intersections of sexuality and politics, a new framework for understanding progressive motherhood can be created that focuses specifically on black maternity in both the present and future.

Considering *Wild Seed's* Anyanwu, *Mind of My Mind's* Mary, and *Survivor's* Alanna, I find that the *Patternists'* women enter into motherhood as an obligation as it is the expectation of their patriarchal societies, thus not necessarily furthering their own positions or power.

Conversely, Amber, the female protagonist of *Patternmaster*, chooses to bear Teray's offspring as a political alliance to ensure her elevated status in a hierarchal society that otherwise does not allow her to own House. This decision is a progressive form of motherhood, one that brings forth a series of elements—power, sexuality, and refusal to submit to marriage—that make Amber an Afrofuturistic feminist. Simply, Amber is the *Patternist's* only female protagonist to experience a progressive form of motherhood, actively choosing pregnancy to elevate her political and social powers and thus breaking away from Butler's other women.

### **Struggles with Motherhood**

Contemporary black motherhood scholarship often looks at the past, with slavery as a key focus. There is not enough work concerned with contemporary black mothering, specifically as it examines the present and past, not just the present, like Angela Davis's scholarship on black

motherhood in relation to slavery, specifically “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” When considering Afrofuturistic texts set in both the near and distant futures, sources of theoretical frameworks are also limited. However, through careful combination and analyses of several theoretical texts, I have created definitions for both progressive and regressive motherhoods, emphasizing a nuanced understanding of black motherhood. Rather than rely on a binary that posits motherhood as either progressive or regressive, I offer nuanced versions of both to exhibit the multiplicity of black motherhood.

Progressive motherhood, for the confines of this chapter, is defined as the decision to enter motherhood on one’s own terms, meaning that the choice rests with the person experiencing the pregnancy. Progressive motherhood may have various aims. For some mothers, this decision is ultimately the ownership of their own bodies, controlling both their reproductive agency and sexuality while making the decision to produce offspring independent of other entities. This choice may also denote the decision to have children to achieve status or power of some kind. In terms of Amber’s decision to reproduce, this choice is progressive in that she uses her offspring to not only gain a higher status within the Pattern, thus possibly influencing reform in her futuristic feudal society, but also to ascertain control over her own House, a physical location that encompasses large amounts of land, a home, and inhabitants that work for the master, and the ability to maintain queer nonmonogamous relationships. Here, this choice for maternity is progressive in that Amber wields her reproductive capabilities to gain what she desires and does not sacrifice her desire for power.

Conversely, regressive motherhood is a form of maternity where women, due to the presence of their partners and/or offspring, revert to a more dependent state, meaning that motherhood removes their agency to varying degrees. This variance of dependency is contingent

on the mother's specific situation. The home, the restrictions created by the necessity of children's wellbeing, relationships with partners, and, in some instances, maternal slavery are all contributing factors. These factors denote the absence of choice, with subjugation serving a key role. This subjugation, one that makes otherwise independent women subservient to the desires of their partners and children, works as a means of devaluation in that the women's capabilities separate from domesticity and childbearing are treated with lesser importance. Simply, their ability to reproduce and nurture are valued, creating a hierarchy of importance with motherhood functioning as the hierarchal top.

With terms defined it is now possible to contextualize black motherhood and how it can be constructed both progressively and regressively. First, black motherhood, as elucidated by Janet Sims-Wood, has been culturally constructed to impart a key image: "Historically, one of the most pervasive images of Black women in America has been that of the 'superstrong, resilient mother who is devoted, self-sacrificing, understanding and wise,' her love 'enduring, unconditional and without error'" (139). Using the word *pervasive* to describe this maternal depiction, Sims-Wood denotes an inaccuracy: the erasure of multiplicity. This traditional definition of black motherhood ignores other depictions of black mothers, specifically those who enter motherhood unwillingly, such as through lacking access to contraception, rape, or maternal slavery. This lack of multiplicity does not consider black women who bear children for alternative purposes, with motherhood not serving as a practice of nurturing but instead ways that benefit the woman, like establishment in a society. This one-dimensional perspective of black motherhood is particularly troubling in that it seeks to speak a universal truth that all black mothers perpetuate this loving, nurturing, and, as Sims-Wood states, "self-sacrificing" caricature,

never considering that some black women may find motherhood a troubling and problematic endeavor.

While this specific cultural construction of black motherhood depicts black women as consistently benevolent and doting figures, Hortense J. Spillers, in her article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” writes of the problematic depictions of black motherhood created by the white hegemony, a notion Spillers puts forth through the inclusion of text from *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), what has come to be known as the “Moynihan Report”: “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure, which because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (qtd. in Spillers 65). In his report, Daniel Patrick Moynihan asserts that matriarchy, a social structure ruled by women, hinders the progress of black people, thus shifting the blame of racial inequalities instituted by the white hegemony on black women. Matriarchy makes mothers leaders of their respective homes, familial lives, and communities. On its surface, this idea of matriarchy is compelling in that it positions women as leaders in a traditionally patriarchal society, but Moynihan places blame with black women, arguing that black women hinder the progress of their people. This idea that black women who bear children, specifically those in supposed matriarchal societies, impede their own communities is an affront to black motherhood, as Spillers points out. Considering the nurturing depiction of black mothers discussed by Sims-Wood in combination with Moynihan’s belief regarding black matriarchies, there are conflicts in interpretation. These conflicts create opposing depictions, with one as perfect and all-encompassing and the other as destructive and harmful to progress. These opposing depictions create a dichotomy that does not consider how

motherhood impacts a specific woman, leaving no representation for black women who may view maternity as not a duty but instead a choice for their own fulfillment and betterment.

Angela Davis, in “The Black Woman’s Role,” writes of the traditional roles of black women, stemming from both Africa and slavery.

It was the woman who was charged with keeping the ‘home’ in order. This role was dictated by the male supremacist ideology of white society in America; it was also woven into the patriarchal traditions of Africa. As her biological destiny, the woman bore the fruits of procreation; as her social destiny, she cooked, sewed, washed, cleaned house, raised the children. Traditionally the labor of females, domestic work is supposed to complement and confirm their inferiority. (86)

Here, Davis provides a bleak depiction of black women’s roles, attributing their subjugation to a white and black heteropatriarchy. This conflicts with Moynihan in that the matriarchy he depicts presents an inaccurate representation of black female empowerment, ultimately arguing black women are a large factor in the regression of black people. Davis, however, contends that black women are historically subjugated, meaning that Moynihan argues that black women are problematic whereas Davis asserts that black women are affected by the problem. With motherhood and matriarchy in opposition, black motherhood’s role is in question; specifically, at what point can motherhood be considered progressive?

This question of progressive motherhood is important to pose when considering modern perspectives on the intersections of race and sexuality, specifically how black women practice their respective sexualities in ways conducive to their needs, desires, and bodies. When maternity is added to this discussion, there are further complications of black women’s historical issues with motherhood stemming from slavery, with oppression and male-led dominance playing integral roles. Given these historical concepts of oppression and rule by the white hegemony, the idea of black motherhood in both the present day and the future invites a question, one posed by

Alexander G. Weheliye in his introduction to *Habeus Viscus*: “Why are the formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed?” (2). Here, although not explicitly discussing motherhood, Weheliye posits the question of why society considers only acts of opposition as true signifiers of the oppressed people’s resistance. This question is applicable to black motherhood in that maternity has frequently been implemented as a means of punishment and control, thus perpetuating regressive motherhood to varying degrees. By reclaiming motherhood and repurposing it to meet the wants and needs of black women, black motherhood can be argued as a liberatory act. This liberation is a progressive measure where maternity is a decision that rests with black women, making black motherhood an autonomous decision.

Weheliye’s commentary on small acts of resistance facilitates conversations concerning sex and power dynamics, with sexuality serving as a means of power. Aida Levy-Husson, in “For Contradiction (On Masochism),” writes of the difficulties of this dynamic in African-American literary studies: “Even deliberately sex-positive projects have been reluctant to acknowledge explicit eroticizations of power and powerlessness within black culture” (55). Although largely discussing examples of masochism in neo-slave narratives, Levy-Husson’s discussion of sex-positivity and the reluctance to sexualize power is applicable to black motherhood in that the decision, one made by a black woman, to get pregnant, by using sexual intercourse, can be deemed sexual as reproduction serves as the purpose. This sexual decision is a power move in progressive motherhood, with the levels of power varying depending on circumstances. By actively choosing motherhood, a historically regressive position that disempowered black women, black women, through autonomous decisions to use their own bodies and sexual reproductive capabilities, create an act of reclamation where mothering is not a

punishment but rather a willful decision that potentially enables black women to bear offspring to further their aims.

Considering these conflicting depictions, specifically the stereotypical portrayal of the self-sacrificing black mother and Moynihan's ideas on the destructiveness of black matriarchies, alongside Davis's assertions on black women's historic struggles with familial life and domesticity, black motherhood has a complicated construction and maternity is historically understood by the white hegemony as a regressive move that ultimately overpowers the black mother's desires. However, given Weheliye's question concerning liberation against the hegemony and Levy-Husson's contention on the sexualization of power, progressive motherhood, when practiced as a woman's choice to meet or fulfill her needs, is a possibility, creating a new framework for narratives of black motherhood in both contemporary times and the future.

### **Butler's Regressive Mothers**

Before considering Amber's progressive motherhood, it is pertinent to outline the regressive motherhood present throughout the *Patternist* series. Of the five novels, three—*Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and *Survivor* (1978)—feature female protagonists whose respective participation in maternity is done not out of desire but instead obligation. Firstly, *Wild Seed's* Anyanwu is a mother to forty-six children before meeting Doro, a vampiric body shifter at the helm of centuries of genetic experiments. While her pregnancies prior to Doro are arguably progressive in that she creates communities using her offspring to ensure her safety, many of her pregnancies after aligning with Doro—which result from Doro and other men of his choosing—constitute a form of maternal slavery. Anyanwu, when living in Doro's colony in the New



World, must follow his orders, making her decision to leave Africa with Doro regressive in that she loses not only her autonomy but also contributes to Doro's breeding system, making her offspring dependent on Doro's whims.

*Mind of My Mind's* Mary, like Anyanwu, is influenced by Doro. As Doro's child and sometimes lover, Mary transitions into a telepath and creates the Pattern, a chain connecting her, the Patternmaster, to other telepathic descendants of Doro. Unlike Anyanwu, Mary does not conceive Doro's children, but instead reproduces with Karl, her husband. This decision to reproduce, however, is not done out of maternal desire. Rather, it is an obligation that extends Karl and Mary's lineage, since they are Doro's two strongest telepaths. While this decision to create offspring appears progressive in that it arguably starts Mary's dynasty, the offspring itself is inconsequential or of little concern to Mary, specifically as telepaths are repulsed by their children. Mary does not raise her child and instead allows latents, humans without telepathic capabilities, to rear her child. To have this child is a decision made at Doro's urging. Doro ignores what Mary wants and instead demands that she pass her strong capabilities to future generations, thus allowing his breeding programs to evolve and progress. Mary's foray into motherhood is arguably regressive as it is Doro's demand and that telepaths are physically and emotionally repulsed by their offspring. Here, Mary is not afforded the autonomy to decide. Rather, it is an aspect of maternal slavery that places the control of a black woman's reproductive freedoms with a patriarchal figure.

Lastly, Alanna of *Survivor* becomes a mother stemming from captivity. While Alanna becomes both an active participant and a highly-regarded member of her new community, the daughter she has with the tribe's leader is not intentional, with the start of the sexual relationship not Alanna's choice. Although Alanna and the tribe's leader develop a consensual relationship

and her pregnancy is celebrated, this unplanned pregnancy leaves Alanna disempowered as a result of her child's murder resulting from an attack by an opposing colony and forces her into captivity, meaning that Alanna's foray into motherhood leaves her without both her child and her freedom, as she is kidnapped by an enemy tribe. Alanna, a high-profile person of her community, is targeted through her child, meaning that it is her unplanned motherhood that causes her pain and capture.

### **Motherhood as a Progressive Choice**

To consider the significance of motherhood in Butler's texts, specifically within the *Patternist* series, it is important to understand the complicated relationships the female characters have with maternity. Allison, again considering Butler's women, notes that her mothers struggle with their role: "Though Butler designates the mother as the civilizing force in human society—the one who teaches both men and children compassion and empathy—she also shows it is not a role that women easily or willingly take on" (473). Butler creates fictive worlds in which women are tasked with both reproducing and creating utopic societies. As the female characters must have children and create better worlds for their offspring and partners, having children hinders their own personal development, not, in the instance of Mary, fulfilling what the women want or desire. Rather, this act of motherhood is regressive in that it ignores the plans of Butler's women and instead makes maternity and lessons of empathy the top priorities, making the women third to men and children. However, considering this framework of the nuances of progressive and regressive motherhood, this form of black motherhood may exhibit a progressive bent when the decision is made to ascertain what the woman needs or desires, much like Amber's pregnancy for political alliance. When motherhood is beneficial for the furtherment of women, it may be

considered progressive by the mother, specifically as the choice is made by the woman and not out of obligation. However, this progressivism is not exclusive to the individual woman. Rather, progressive motherhood is beneficial to the status of all women and mothers in that it denotes a choice for all. This choice is not up to a male controlled higher entity or legislation. This ability to get pregnant when it is beneficial to a woman is key to both reproductive freedom and the furtherment of women's powers. By having offspring to fulfill a need or desire for empowerment, motherhood can be a progressive decision in that it affords elevation.

Considering this regressive trend suggested by Moynihan in relation to *The Patternist* series, Sharon DeGraw, writing about Butler's female protagonists, claims, "The women have talent, motivation and strong character, and fortune favors them. However, these things only allow them to survive and, at most, be the significant others of the most powerful men of a given society." What is noteworthy of the female characters in Butler's fiction, especially those featured in the *Patternist* series, like Anyanwu and Mary, are the ways in which they surpass and complicate their respective gender performances despite their ultimate links to male partners, namely Doro. This concept of subverting gender roles is applied to Amber in Butler's first published novel *Patternmaster*, especially in terms of her healer abilities, her potential for ruling her own House, and the autonomy to control her pregnancies by deciding both who can and cannot impregnate her and whether to terminate said pregnancy. This, as Susana M. Morris asserts, speaks to Afrofuturism's connection with feminism: "I see Afrofuturism and black feminism as symbiotic modes of thought and practice in many ways, and argue that 'coupling Afrofuturism with feminism expands the former's capacity to transgress normative boundaries of not only race, but of gender, sexuality, ability, and other subject positions'" (qtd. in Morris). With such an Afrofuturistic text coupled with a queer woman of color protagonist with the

inherent abilities to both rule her own house and control her own reproductive autonomy, feminism furthers Afrofuturism's purpose in portraying people of color in future societies. Through Amber's portrayal, Butler's feminist addition positions Amber as capable of not only exercising her rights, but also affords her the ability to control the Pattern, create a future with or without children, and to use her offspring to secure her future, making progressive motherhood a reality.

With issues surrounding maternity contextualized, Amber's active decision to become pregnant with Teray's offspring positions her decision as a nuanced version of progressive motherhood, specifically in that she gains what she wants, using pregnancy as a bargaining tool. As noted by Gregory J. Hampton, Amber, a healer Teray meets in Coransee's house, serves as a "subversive matriarch," one who chooses not to usurp Teray's chances at becoming Patternmaster despite her qualifications, which is done to solidify the chances her offspring with Teray may one day claim the role of Patternmaster. This action is what Hampton claims makes Amber "a clever negotiator of power in a patriarchal and heterosexist society" (63). While this decision to defer her power and superior strength to her male partner appears to contradict a feminist ideal of a potential female leader and does not actively push the Afrofuturistic idea of projecting black women as leaders in a futuristic society, the move is strategic on Amber's part in that by aligning herself with Rayal's son she not only solidifies her position as a lead wife and mother of Teray's first offspring, but he also ensures her political safety. She is aware of her strengths as a healer and understands her capabilities as a leader and her own potential of ruling a House. By using offspring as a bargaining tool and deciding to keep the pregnancy, Amber aligns herself with a partner who can continue her own power, thus making her a figure that can acquire additional power with the aid of the Patternmaster. This perpetuates the notion of

problematic matriarchy in that Amber has offspring to ascertain her own power. Here, Butler refuses to offer easy answers concerning Amber's decision to reproduce. While Amber decides to keep her pregnancy, she does so for political gain, making this an autonomous decision that determines the fate of her offspring. However, she arguably finds empowerment through motherhood, allowing her to create a matriarchal role that assists her own agenda.

### **Race, Gender, and Motherhood**

With this overview of Amber's decision to become a mother, her pregnancy is a choice that enables her an independence with Teray, the future Patternmaster. What makes this choice progressive in both terms of her actual decision and her characterization is that Amber is a queer woman of color living in a futuristic feudal society, one that keeps women subservient to men through mind control. Amber's decision to permanently link herself to Teray's lineage enables her a certain degree of freedom, all of which potentially allows her to be a Housemaster, have nonmonogamous relationships with her male partner Teray and other women, and influence her offspring, knowing that with her powers combined with Teray's could produce an heir to the Pattern. Amber's decision is a progressive choice, especially considering the elements of her characterization that would hinder her rise to power under other circumstances.

Amber is described as "a golden-brown woman with hair that was a round cap of small, tight black curls" (Butler 670). Whereas the women of the other books in the *Patternist* series are not the lone people of color, Amber is the only character of *Patternmaster* to stand out in terms of race. This characterization is impacted by her abilities, as discussed by DeGraw: "Neither a Housemaster, a lead wife, or a mute (a nontelepathic human) but an 'independent' she blurs the class boundaries as the society as well" (DeGraw). Similarly, Ruth Salvaggio claims of the

women in Butler's *Patternist* series that "it is Amber who most dramatically personifies independence, autonomy, and liberation" (79). Here, Amber is a powerful woman of color, an anomaly in her world. She is not dependent upon becoming the lead wife of a Housemaster nor is she without strong telepathic capabilities. Through this characterization, Amber is capable of remaining independent of marriage, but her independent status perpetuates her in-between status, meaning she is of a higher class due to her strong healing capabilities but is not in a position of heightened authority because she is neither a Housemaster in her own right nor a lead wife of a Housemaster. Amber is positioned as a powerful figure who will have difficulty progressing in social status on her own due to her reputation. In turn, this creates a necessity for negotiating motherhood as either a surrender or a bargaining tool. Amber could align herself with a male Housemaster, like Coransee, bear his children and secure wealth, but Amber would ultimately lose all that she values, like her healer capabilities, the ability to move between Houses, and her queerness, specifically as queerness is not accepted in her society. Pregnancy as a bargaining tool, however, presents a brighter future, one that does not erase Amber's past and sexuality, affords her independence and power, and connects her to the Patternmaster, thus making motherhood a progressive option.

Amber's own powers, including her use of her offspring as a bargaining tool, are key components of this argument. Amber's powers intersect with gender, race, and sexuality to highlight her own progressivism, as elucidated by Ruth Salvaggio: "And because Amber is a woman who refuses to act out traditional female roles (she will not be any man's wife, she is sexually androgynous, she is stronger and more independent than most men), their relationships [Amber and Teray] continually highlights sexual and feminist issues" (79). This refusal to perpetuate gender stereotypes is not just a protest against patriarchy. Rather, it is about survival

and continuing her own reach, not compromising herself to comfortably remain in a stagnant position of power. By understanding Amber's actions and her identity as a queer woman of color, it is clear she stands apart from her female *Patternist* predecessors and makes pregnancy without the promise of marriage a progressive decision that allows her influence to flourish, not remain focused on imparting lessons of empathy and civility.

### **Motherhood to Ascertain Sexual Freedom**

Amber is the lone queer-identified character of the *Patternist* series. This addition of queerness is not out of the norm for Butler's other characters, but the characters, with the exception of *Fledgling*'s Shori (2005), typically partake in these relationships reluctantly: "Homosexuality, incest, and multiple sexual pairings turn up in almost all her books, usually insisted on by the patriarchal or alien characters and resisted by the heroines, who eventually give in" (Allison 472). That Butler's women submit to homosexuality is troubling in that it denotes the idea that queerness is problematic and not to be practiced. Amber, however, is a bisexual woman who is unashamed to acknowledge not only her relationship with Kai but also her desire to pursue romantic and sexual relationships with women. She states, "When I meet a woman who attracts me, I prefer women... And when I meet a man who attracts me, I prefer men... Most people who ask want me definitely on one side or the other" (Butler 717). Here, Amber's acknowledgement of her bisexuality is two-fold—she effectively situates her sexuality in a white heteropatriarchy and confronts her society's binary emphasis that perpetuates bi-erasure. But Amber's sexuality cannot be practiced without cost while living in a society suspicious of those who practice queerness: "Male sexual jealousy (particularly of female-female relationships), need for possession, and unmediated revenge are common themes throughout the

novel. When Coransee learns of Amber's bisexuality, he becomes determined to control her" (DeGraw). Coransee's desire to control Amber as well as Teray's initial disgust at Amber's disclosure of her sexuality exemplify the issues surrounding queerness—that if a woman deviates from heterosexuality she will be eroticized and her same sex relationship will be taken less seriously because it does not involve men, thus rebuking the patriarchy. Teray's initial disgust and eventual acceptance of Amber's sexuality is a reaction to the notion that sexuality is not a binary but is instead a spectrum. That is what Amber must navigate when disclosing her bisexuality: eroticization, patriarchal control implemented through the Pattern, or initial reactions of biphobia. Considering her sexuality and how it is performed in *Patternmaster*, particularly in ways beneficial to Amber and her partners while also maintaining her independence from men like Coransee, Amber must align herself with a strong partner who will afford her the freedoms of her own House and maintaining romantic and sexual partners. To do so, Amber uses her reproductive liberties to have a baby with Teray. This decision not only makes their offspring a direct descendent of the future Patternmaster but also unites two of their generation's strongest Patternists, making Teray and Amber an unstoppable force. This alignment, however, is created through the aid of negotiations, with Amber making Teray agree to allow her the right to have other partners. In turn, this makes Amber's maternal decision progressive as she uses this pregnancy not only to align herself with Teray, thus making a direct connection to the Patternmaster, but also uses the pregnancy to ascertain sexual freedom.

### **Amber's Powers**

It is pertinent to understand Amber's capabilities, specifically how she gains independence and the strength she exhibited before her transition. Talking about the death of her



second Housemaster, Amber says, “From the beginning, we didn’t get along. And because I was too close to transition to stand mental abuse, he used physical abuse—beat the hell out of me whenever he wanted to until one day I managed to push him so that he fell against the sharp corner of a low concrete wall...Died before anybody could contact a healer. Of course, my abilities weren’t mature, so I couldn’t help him” (Butler 698). Amber, before her transition, defends herself from the physical abuse she faces from her Housemaster, making her capable of not only using her telepathic abilities in subsequent years but also capable of killing a figure capable of determining her future in the Pattern. This ability to not only defend with her mind but also her strength is what makes Amber capable of her independence. It is not just the sheer notion that she defends herself against a leader, but it is also the knowledge that she is both mentally and physically superior to her male peers that makes her stand out, especially when considering the subjugated roles women frequently find themselves performing in the Houses, like wives or mistresses of Housemasters.

Considering Amber’s defense capabilities, it is Amber who attempts to teach Teray to defend himself from a large-scale attack led by Clayarks—mutated humans fighting Patternists for control: “Teray, I’d be a little more diplomatic if it weren’t for the chance of our meeting an army of Clayarks over the next hill. But to put it bluntly, school methods just aren’t good enough out here. Will you let me teach you some others?” (Butler 704). Given her experiences as an independent, a person who does not belong to a specific House, and the memories Kai, her former lover and Housemaster, shared with her, Amber offers to teach Teray how to properly defend himself. Amber is a key source of knowledge, especially given not only her physical and mental strengths but also the awareness that she has successfully been on her own for a few years. Teray refuses: “We’re about the same age...I’m the son of the two strongest Patternists of

their generation, and I'm strong enough myself to succeed the Patternmaster. Yet here you are with your fifteen years of someone else's memories and your four or five years of wandering....” (Butler 705). Here, Teray, thinking that his lineage, not his own education and minimal defense experience, will protect him, does not wish for Amber to teach him how to fight Clayarks. This is what Amber faces—men downplaying her skills and accomplishments all because she is an independent and not linked to a House. Amber's eventual decision to reproduce with Teray is a progressive measure in that she links herself with an influential source, thus making a connection to Teray's House, while also elevating her power and gaining her own House. By doing so, Amber does not entirely lose her independence while also moving past her liminal state, making herself a more established entity. Amber's reproductive liberties are inherently Afrofuturist in that she is the one to make a choice that ascertains her future power. This move is in line with Afrofuturism specifically because this is a powerful elevation of a black woman in a futuristic society, making Amber a leader in her community while affording her specific freedoms she desires most. As such, this is a progressive aspect of motherhood, one that grants her elevated status while also positioning black women in roles of power.

### **The Subversive Matriarch**

Although Amber's decision to reproduce is a progressive choice in that motherhood allows her the opportunities to gain her own House, thus an independence that moves her out of a liminal state, and to acquire a number of partners, there are problematic areas concerning this progressivism, with DeGraw noting the power struggle between Amber and Teray: “With Teray's greater power, it is only his love for Amber and her persistent resistance which gain her even the conditional independence she manages to achieve. In the context of Butler's secondary

female characters, it is noted that ‘one way women will compensate for their physical limitations is by forming liaisons with persons of power’” (qtd. in DeGraw). Here, DeGraw, referencing Foster, claims that it is Teray who gives Amber her freedom, thus not receiving her House in her own right. DeGraw’s assertion disempowers Amber and does not consider her strengths, specifically that Amber is one of the most powerful Patternists of her generation, one who arguably has more experience than Teray as she has drifted from House to House, learning from a variety of sources. To make this claim that Teray gives Amber her independence not only downplays Amber’s abilities and achievements but also disregards Amber’s own decision to get pregnant. While the pregnancy is a bargaining tool that takes Teray and Amber’s connection past the Pattern, it is Amber’s choice to keep the pregnancy. Motherhood is leverage, something Amber knows will aid in her negotiations, progressing her status.

Additionally, Foster’s claim that “one way women will compensate for their physical limitations is by forming liaisons with persons of power” (qtd. in DeGraw) is not entirely wrong in that Amber indeed aligns herself with Teray, a man of considerable strength and power. However, these physical limitations mentioned by Foster are distinctly gendered, implicitly asserting that women’s strengths are not equal to that of men’s. This claim disempowers Amber, specifically considering that Amber is powerful in her own right. While it is indeed her gender that makes her stand apart in her society, Amber’s strength and knowledge, memories imparted to her by Kai (Butler 702), are equal if not superior to Teray’s. What this comes down to is experience versus memories. In a society built around the Pattern and the transferal of memories, particularly those that aid in one’s leadership and protection, it is difficult to value one over the other in that Amber’s memories, specifically in combatting Clayarks, rivals that of Teray’s education. Amber’s attempt at educating Teray ties back to mothering in that Amber, a person

with more experience, takes on the role of educator, trying to assist the less experienced. Considering the gender dynamic, an experienced woman and a man with little practice, Amber takes on a traditionally maternal role, imparting wisdom to a seemingly different generation. In turn, this creates a protector role, like that of fierce motherhood where the maternal figure defends her young while also equipping the less experienced with the necessary skills to survive. While Teray learned how to fight, he was not previously given the resources to put that education into practice. However, Teray's knowledge combined with the power he learns to use is a powerful force. Here, both memories and formal education are sources of power that cannot be valued over the other because both exhibit their significance. Simply, it is about putting those memories and education into practice, something both Teray and Amber do. To prioritize Teray's education over Amber's memories, experiences, and field training is arguably sexist in that a man's education is valued over a woman's education, with formality given precedence over an informal education based on experience.

Speaking to Foster's claim, that Butler's women create unions with powerful people to compensate for their lack of physical strength, while Amber's alliance is with Teray, a physically strong man, her decision to get pregnant is not just an obligation or a survival tactic. Rather, it is a progressive measure that combines her strengths and powers with another powerful figure. This is not a maternal decision to impart empathy and civility to men and children as Butler's other women do, but is rather a decision that elevates Amber's position in the Patternist society, one that gives her an opportunity to achieve what she has always wanted—a House of her own and the liberty to practice her sexuality freely. While this decision to link herself with a man may not appear to be outwardly feminist, it is Amber who controls her reproductive freedom and wields that power for own advancement, thus participating in motherhood on her own terms, thus

controlling her body in a society convinced that her body is not her own. In terms of mothering, Amber's choice is particularly compelling in that while she has the autonomy to decide to keep a pregnancy she also gives part of her body to a fetus, an organism dependent on her wellbeing. By allowing such a dependent to grow, Amber creates a matriarchy, one created not only through her lineage but also her decision to not marry Teray. Here, Amber aligns herself with Teray by bearing his offspring, but her refusal to a matrimonial commitment allows her to start her own line of leaders, one not entirely dependent on a patriarchal lineage. By cutting out the role of the male leader, Amber mothers a new generation, ultimately creating her own family while positioning herself at its helm. Amber's mothering is particularly compelling in that she fosters a potential Patternmaster, thus making her influence the most integral in the child's upbringing. As Amber has the primary influence, it is her mothering that will make this offspring a product of her ideologies, thus allowing Amber to influence the Pattern.

### **Amber, the Afrofuturistic Mother**

While Butler's women, specifically those of her *Patternist* series, complicate their gender performances, making themselves complicated characters capable of making their own decisions and creating communities of their own, they often exhibit complicated relationships with motherhood. These complications are often regressive in that maternity arises out of obligation or reproductive slavery resulting from centuries of genetic experimentation and breeding, thus relegating these otherwise independent women to roles devoted to imparting empathy, making them second to men and children. This regressive motherhood, however, is disrupted in Butler's *Patternmaster*, with Amber, a queer woman of color, using pregnancy as leverage to progress her own status and reach. It is this Afrofuturistic feminist, a black woman of considerable

strength in a future society, that uses motherhood to elevate her status while also distancing herself from Butler's other women, making her an independent character capable of using her reproductive liberties not out of obligation but instead through choice.

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘SHE MY DAUGHTER. SHE MINE’: FIERCE MOTHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON’S *BELOVED* AND OCTAVIA E. BUTLER’S *WILD SEED***

A novel concerned with a black mother and her relationships with her children, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) features Sethe, an escaped slave who experiences difficulties claiming ownership of not only her body but also her children. The complications in claiming ownership signify Sethe’s absence of power, as both a black woman and mother, and the historical denial of motherhood through the American slave trade. The ability to gain ownership serves as a reclamation of motherhood from the white hegemony and those who control or manipulate reproductive liberties, which in turn creates a power struggle. This power struggle, like Sethe saving her children from slavery through the murder of her first daughter, positions a new form of mothering for black women—fierce motherhood.

Indeed, fierce motherhood makes itself clear in other late-twentieth-century novels by black women writers. In Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980), the protagonist, Anyanwu, an African woman with prolonged mortality, is convinced by Doro, a vampiric shapeshifter, to leave her village, assist in his genetic experimentations in creating a breed of superhumans, and emigrate to North America. In turn, Anyanwu finds herself a maternal slave, forced into a marriage, expected to reproduce with her husband, the multiple bodies commandeered by Doro, and Doro’s own descendants, and unable to claim her children as her own. Anyanwu’s enslavement and inability to lay claim to both her body and kin forces her to resist Doro’s domination, necessitating Anyanwu’s escape and creation of her own community on a plantation in Louisiana, using fierce motherhood to evade Doro and protect her offspring. This situation of domination makes fierce motherhood a necessary place of power.

Although fierce motherhood serves as a mode of empowerment, motherhood is not inherently disempowering. As Andrea O'Reilly contends, Morrison "defines motherhood as a site of power" (1). However, considering the intersections of gender and race, black women, through societal standards created by the white hegemony, face difficulties in practicing motherhood. Motherhood, a historically disempowering situation for black American women stemming from the Middle Passage and the slave trade, is reimagined by both Morrison and Butler; these authors give disempowered black women the autonomy to work within the confines of maternity either to claim ownership or to protect their offspring<sup>1</sup>. Considering the historic and present subjugation of black women, black motherhood can also serve as a place for resistance, an action that allows black mothers to reclaim ownership over their children to protect both their offspring and others within the black community from hegemonic forces, making black motherhood a larger political action. With O'Reilly's assertion applied to the historical struggle of black mothering, fierce motherhood, which I define in the following section, serves as the theoretical underpinning of this chapter to illuminate the struggles of both Sethe and Anyanwu, specifically in how they resist power structures to protect their children. In this chapter, through an Afrofuturistic lens aided through feminist and critical race studies, I argue that both Sethe and Anyanwu exemplify a new form of black mothering, one where black mothers claim ownership over their children through a variety of methods, including violence and the cultivation of their own communities, to combat violent atrocities in both the past and future. The fierce motherhood

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<sup>1</sup> The disempowerment of black women and their complicated relationship with motherhood is further explained in the critical introduction.



I discover in Morrison's and Butler's fictions offers a new way to read motherhood in neo-slave narratives and Afrofuturistic texts.

### **Fierce Motherhood**

Fierce motherhood, as defined in this chapter, is the claim of ownership a black mother makes over her offspring and the methods she takes to accomplish those means, like violence, negotiations of power, evasion, and isolation, sometimes creating complicated depictions of black maternity. Despite the differences of their enslavements, both *Beloved's* Sethe and *Wild Seed's* Anyanwu resist in ways that can be defined as fierce. Sethe and Anyanwu are black mothers who struggle to control the fates of their offspring, with both women tied to differing forms of slavery. Sethe, an escaped slave in 1873 Ohio, and Anyanwu, a three hundred-year-old shape shifter and Doro's maternal slave of 150 years, face different obstacles concerning the fate of their children. Sethe, when confronted by bounty hunters determined to take her and her children back to Sweet Home, slashes her oldest daughter's throat and kills her to prevent her daughter's re-entry into slavery. The stigma of Sethe's actions result in isolation, with Denver and eventually Paul D as Sethe's community. Anyanwu is the mother of 47 children prior to meeting Doro. After years of maternal slavery with him, the violent death of her husband Isaac, and Doro's displays of negligence towards the lives of his offspring, Anyanwu constantly changes form for 109 years and creates her own colony of superhumans to determine the safety of her past, present, and future offspring, many of which result from her enslavement. While Sethe and Anyanwu do not fiercely mother in the same way, they both contest oppressive power structures, institutionalized and maternal slavery, to subvert power, reclaim their kin, and claim long-denied ownership.

Fierce, when combined with motherhood, specifically within the confines of both *Beloved* and *Wild Seed*, denotes an impactful maternity, meaning that both Sethe and Anyanwu work to protect their children from enslavement, thus stopping a cycle of slavery. This protection combats an otherwise hopeless situation: “This desperate mother, who takes her child’s destiny into her own hands rather than relinquishing that child into the world, also emerges as a figure of rebellion” (Dawkins 223). Asserting that the subjugated black mother who works to control the fate of her offspring is disobedient, Laura Dawkins makes an important distinction—that this act of mothering is done out of desperation. Desperation, when applied to black motherhood, is applicable to the past and present as black mothers face many challenges in safeguarding their children from the likes of slavery, racial violence, and police brutality. The inclusion of time is important to fierce motherhood considering both the historical and present policing of black bodies, signifying that the vigilance from black mothers is still necessary. Forging together rebellion, desperation, and fear (for their own and their children’s futures), a new use of the term fierce motherhood is used to provide necessary attention to another narrative of motherhood.

In the American slave trade, black mothers, because of the claims of ownership held by slave owners, could not claim their children as their own, which severed the ties of kinship. This separation of black mothers from their children created a site of trauma, with mothers unable to care for and create bonds with their children. Kinship is a key force in the configuration of one’s community. Kinship is impacted by a variety of influences—economic, racial, sexual—and, when applied to the experiences of black women of the slave era, is particularly confounded by the abuse of black women’s reproductive abilities and the subsequent separation, with mothers often not allowed relationships with their children. As a result, the claim of one’s kin is a form of resistance, directly defying those in charge. This claim of kin, a stake of ownership, creates a

difficult understanding of possession, especially when in opposition to the tyrannical rule of slavery, an idea discussed by Christopher Peterson: “Certainly the conventional language of kinship does not suppose that one possesses one’s children in the same way that a slave master owns his slaves. Kinship is not identical to slavery. Yet, the conventional opposition of slavery and kinship tends to idealize the latter by insulating it from property relations” (548). Here, Peterson states that kinship, while exhibiting elements of ownership related to belonging, is dissimilar from slavery in that it does not treat those considered as kin as property. Fierce motherhood, when applied to this definition of kinship, is a reclamation from slavery, one where the children and freedom denied to the enslaved are finally in the possession of the black mother, making offspring and the families that arise from these configurations a key motivator in the black mothers’ acts of resistance.

As previously stated, kinship is a form of social organization. When applied to slavery, the result of maternity does not belong to the mother but is instead the property of the master, something further discussed by Hortense Spillers: “Under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the latter ‘possesses’ it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and*, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony...the offspring of the enslaved, being unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners..., find themselves in the situations of being orphans” (74). Here, Spillers, clarifying the ownership of children born into slavery, argues that because of the hegemonic disconnect between slave mothers and their offspring, enforced largely through unjust property laws, slave children, despite some living near their birth parents and “belonging” to a master, are essentially orphans: “I would call this enforced state of breach another instance of vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any*

*given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*” (Spillers 74). Spillers contends that kinship, under the rule of slavery, can be manipulated, with slave children’s fates at the hand of slave owners, meaning that familial bonds can be broken as slaves are considered property. Here, there is a power struggle in ownership, creating questions on the nature of kinship and how an enslaved mother can claim her own children, which in turn puts kinship’s actual role into question, an idea acknowledged by Peterson: “Spillers does little to challenge the primacy of what David Schneider has called the ‘idiom of kinship,’ that is, the notion that blood ties constitute the privileged domain of social belonging. Kinship becomes the foil of the negativity of master/slave dialectic, notwithstanding the possibility that kinship, both paternal *and* maternal, might be implicated in that very negativity” (549). Simply, Peterson uncovers the conflicting ownership between master and mother, asserting that the power of biological relations outweighs the ownership of the slave master. However, in instances where genetic connections are not privileged in terms of ownership, this leaves the black mother with limited options, creating a need for direct action—the fierceness of black motherhood.

The direct action known as fierce motherhood relocates power to those historically disempowered. Despite the historical subjugation of black mothers, maternity, when the maternal autonomy is conjured either through determination or rebellion, serves as a place of power, allowing black women to create lineages that will impact the future and allowing their offspring to “receive the preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing needed for personal resistance and cultural renewal” (O’Reilly 46). Using O’Reilly as an influence, Edith Frampton, asserting that “mothering can be...personally empowering to individual women and politically empowering to the African-American community generally,” argues that black motherhood positively impacts both the mother and her community as long as the offspring are properly equipped to withstand

opposing forces and grow in ways that benefit both themselves and their culture (142). While applicable to black motherhood in general, mothering serves as a place of resistance. This resistance consists of actions involving violence, evasion, and isolation, all done to claim ownership, provide better futures, and, for Sethe, to come to terms with a traumatizing past. I argue that fierce motherhood creates a new reading of both Sethe and Anyanwu, showing two black mothers determined to safeguard their children from horrific fates.

### **Sethe, the Traumatized Mother**

To gain ownership of her children, Sethe must first ascertain her freedom from slavery. In a flashback recounting Sethe's first 28 days at 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe confronts her newfound freedom, wondering what she must do to establish herself and maximize her liberty: "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 95). The effects of slavery, like the absence of Sethe's mother and the knowledge that if slavery is still considered legal that her and her children's freedom is at risk, creates a situation where Sethe feels that she must take drastic measures to ensure that freedom. As someone previously owned, especially as a person who, under the practice of slavery, did not have a claim to her own children, Sethe must navigate her freedom and her understanding of self-ownership in ways that make her body and its products, her offspring, her own, laying claim to what freedom provides. In attempts to claim ownership, Sethe takes violent actions, like killing her oldest daughter, and works to love and provide for her children in ways that were not accessible to her as a child, like a stable home and the constant presence of a mother. As these examples show, the trauma of the past influences Sethe's present. However, the influence of trauma "inspire[s] Sethe to protect her

children from the same fate by fully—and as many critics have argued excessively—devoting her body to her offspring” (Lillvis 456). Here, in the instance of *Beloved*, fierce motherhood is a claim of ownership that forces the black mother to commit her energies, thus sacrificing her body and her child, to ensure the freedom of herself and her children.

Trauma serves as the foundation of Sethe’s fierce motherhood, forcing her to protect her children in any way she deems necessary. This trauma—the absence of her mother, a person she knows as Ma’am—is one Sethe does not wish for her children to experience, making the anguish over her absent mother a motivating factor. Considering the lasting impact of unresolved trauma, Sethe’s anguish from the past influences her motherhood, making it necessary to examine her childhood. Kristen Lillvis proposes a new method of examining Sethe’s motivations: “Although often studied as a mother, Sethe must also be understood as a daughter who struggles with feelings of abandonment concerning the maternal care of which she never received quite enough” (453). Noting the lacking scholarship concerning Sethe as a daughter, Lillvis makes an important distinction—Sethe’s trauma resulting from abandonment influences her own motherhood. I argue that this abandonment informs Sethe’s feelings about maternal ownership and drives her to resist both Schoolteacher and slavery, urging her to liberate her children from slavery, sending them across the Ohio River ahead of her own departure, and then attempting to sacrifice their lives when confronted with a return to slavery.

First, to understand the severity of Sethe’s maternal abandonment because of slavery and why fierce motherhood is at the core of her mothering style, Sethe, while cooking with Denver and Beloved, acknowledges that she only saw her mother a few times in the fields, saying that the only substantial time they spent together was the first two or three weeks of Sethe’s life when

Ma'am breastfed her. As a child, however, Sethe briefly speaks to her mother, a conversation that ingrained the notion of ownership into her psyche:

Right on her rib was a circle and cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This," and she pointed. "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." It scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something to say back.... (Morrison 61)

Ma'am, showing her brand to Sethe, instills an early lesson—that they are owned and the claim has been made by the slave master, making any claim of ownership over Sethe made by Ma'am invalid because both Ma'am and Sethe, who is also eventually branded, are marked as property. As a result, they own nothing, not even their familial bond. This trauma of being unclaimed by her mother is further confounded when Ma'am is killed and is not identifiable: "By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (Morrison 61). The issue surrounding Ma'am's identification, specifically that her brand is no longer decipherable, speaks to the unsteady state of ownership, particularly how one is claimed as property. Because of the horrific nature of Ma'am's death, it is not immediately clear who owns her, meaning that her brand is used to claim ownership only when she is alive. Branding exhibits a distinct difference between ownership and kinship. Ownership, in this specific context, rejects familial bonds through the separation of mothers from their children, mutilates bodies to dehumanize, thus blurring the line between human and livestock, and treats slaves as disposable resources, unconcerned with claiming slaves who face heinous deaths. Kinship, however, has no influence, meaning that, under the system of slavery, no one other than the slaveowner and his family can legitimately claim another person. Sethe, already without her mother's daily presence, sees her mother's corpse, is unable to identify her, and understands that there is little concern, showing Sethe the disposability of ownership and how easily kinship can

be manipulated and broken. Given that Sethe cannot identify Ma'am, unclear ownership also leads to uncertain kinship. Ma'am cannot claim maternal ownership over Sethe. The only physical connection the mother and daughter have are their brands, signifying that Ma'am birthed Sethe. Once that signifier is no longer identifiable, that claim to kinship is lost, meaning that Sethe no longer has even a symbolic connection to her mother. The severance of kinship serves as the foundation of Sethe's trauma, one that impacts her own motherhood. This trauma, the aftermath of slavery's rejection of biological kinship and the violent death of her mother, urges Sethe to claim an ownership over her own children, doing whatever she can to ensure that her children are breastfed (a bonding moment Sethe shares with Ma'am for only a few weeks), and using her freed self to claim ownership over what is rightfully hers—her children. That claim to ownership is accomplished through the fierce methods of Sethe's maternity.

Sethe's trauma as a daughter combined with the past circumstances of her maternity and the violent actions she takes to protect her children exhibits a struggle with preserving ownership. When he explains Sethe's actions to Paul D, a former slave and Sethe's romantic partner, Stamp Paid asserts "She ain't crazy. She loves those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (Morrison 234). Here, Stamp Paid does not view Sethe as villainous. Rather, he contends that Sethe killed her daughter out of love, forcing herself to curb prolonged violence with murder with the rationale that she loves her daughter so fiercely that she does not wish her to suffer a similar fate. This desire to protect results in the loss of Sethe's ownership of her daughter, meaning that now the child is dead and is not owned by anyone other than Sethe. Here, Sethe forfeits her kinship so that the ownership may not be reversed as "it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations," meaning that the master/slave claim supersedes kinship and its properties (Spillers 74). By doing so, Sethe takes the ultimate claim of



ownership, killing her daughter so that no one else may have her. It is a sacrificial ownership where kinship, serving as the focus of Sethe's control, is disrupted so that it may not be violated under the guise of property. Given that Stamp Paid asserts that Sethe loves her children, the death of Sethe's daughter is arguably done out of love, one Sethe attempts to navigate after being told most of her life that she belongs to no one.

The love Sethe experiences for her children is integral to her strong ties to ownership and what happens when that claim is challenged. Telling Paul D about seeing her children for the first time after escaping Sweet Home, Sethe speaks of the love she experienced: "It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between...Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here...there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to" (Morrison 162). After escaping Sweet Home, Sethe experiences maternal love in ways she has never felt before. Sethe differentiates the ownership of this love, noting that at Sweet Home her children were the property of the Garners and Schoolteacher. Sweet Home, with its owners and their violence and oppression, no longer controls Sethe's right to lay claim to her children, essentially marking her own offspring as her property.

In turn, this idea of offspring as property creates a problematic area with fierce motherhood's emphasis on kinship—that kinship, in some instances, like a power struggle, can overextend its claim, creating a bond so strong that destruction may occur at a threat of upheaval. Living most of her life unable to claim herself let alone her children, Sethe clings to the liberties of her new life, one constricted by slavery. The atrocities of slavery prevent familial bonds, forcing mothers to have little to no relationships with their children, thus disrupting connections

to kin. Once her freedom is directly challenged, Sethe's short-lived claim to her children is threatened. The trauma of her mother's absence combined with her newfound freedom urges Sethe to protect her claim to kin at all costs. While clear that one of Sethe's motivations is to prevent her children's return to slavery, the result of her actions exhibits the sometimes violent results of resistance. It is Sethe's claim to kinship that turns deadly. The child's death exhibits how desperation impacts fierce motherhood, which is a result from the traumas of the absence of kin. While I argue that the trauma of abandonment is a driving force in Sethe's practice of fierce motherhood, I also contend that Sethe's strong rooted desire to claim ownership becomes a possessive force, one that compels her to claim ownership over kin no matter the cost.

This cost of fierce motherhood and resisting the white hegemony is sacrifice, with Sethe sacrificing her ownership of kin so that her children may not be owned by anyone else. When a claim to kinship is imminent, specifically threatening the strong bond made through fierce motherhood, all ties to the oppressors must be severed, with resistance manifesting as violence. Here, two opposing owners meet—Schoolteacher and Sethe. Both want ownership for different purposes, with Schoolteacher attempting to reclaim his “property”—Sethe and her children—and Sethe defending her offspring from slavery. To overpower Schoolteacher, Sethe returns to her trauma, knowing that she will be separated from her children and be relegated to a similar role as Ma'am, and decides to relinquish her kin to maintain their freedom. As mentioned above, Sethe ensures that Schoolteacher will not take any of her children back to Sweet Home: “Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim” (Morrison 149). The word *claim* is important to note. Once the oldest daughter dies and Sethe must be turned over to police enforcement, Schoolteacher views this incident as loss of property, giving him nothing to return to Sweet Home. This dehumanizes Sethe and her children, making them

property used for personal gain. Sethe, as a practice of fierce motherhood, sacrifices her claim to her children, going so far as to kill her oldest daughter. This is where *claim* has two different meanings. Schoolteacher views a claim to obtain to preserve property. Sethe, however, understands a claim to be a tight, lasting bond with family, believing that her offspring are her possessions. By sacrificing her claim to kin, thus losing the maternal bond she lacked in childhood, she loses what she loves so that they do not experience prolonged pain from slavery. Here, fierce motherhood is at play, with Sethe, relying on her trauma as a guide, acting violently to protect what she owns—her children.

### **Anyanwu, the Fierce Mother of Many**

Whereas Morrison's Sethe practices fierce motherhood as a response to the trauma of her childhood past, using the past to influence the present, Butler's Anyanwu, the protagonist of *Wild Seed*, employs the concepts of fierce motherhood to protect herself and also her expansive offspring from trauma in the future, using fierce motherhood to impact the children to come. Anyanwu agrees to join Doro to assist his genetic experiment in creating a breed of superhumans. However, Anyanwu does not enter this arrangement blindly; she establishes that Doro must not harm her children. As their time together escalates, with Anyanwu moving to the American colonies, time and again Anyanwu finds herself a victim of maternal slavery and constantly trying to negotiate with Doro to ensure a few things: that her offspring are not mistreated and that she be able to live independently. These negotiations often fail, meaning that Anyanwu does what she must, like submit to Doro to survive, evade Doro for nearly a century, and create a community of her own. For Anyanwu, fierce motherhood is not about violently confronting trauma but rather a series of well devised plans that remove her from Doro's

ownership so that she may protect her offspring of the present and future from the traumas of separation, genetic experimentation, and maternal slavery.

After meeting Doro, an ancient vampiric spirit, Anyanwu agrees to leave her native Africa and follow him as his wife with the intent of assisting Doro's genetic experimentations carried out in seed colonies around the world. However, Anyanwu, after being promised to Doro, is told to marry Isaac, one of Doro's sons, and to fruitfully reproduce, both together and with other partners. This reproductive configuration is a form of maternal slavery, an idea made clear upon Isaac and Anyanwu's first sexual encounter: "He [Isaac] lifted her with the strength of his arms alone and carried her to the great soft bed, there to make the children who would prolong her slavery" (Butler 123). Although Anyanwu is not tied to slavery in ways similar to Sethe, her reproductive liberties have been claimed by Doro. Doro tells Anyanwu, a woman who can control whether she gets pregnant, when to have children and who will father said offspring, with Doro sometimes taking a different body and other times forcing Anyanwu to visit one of his colonies. Here, ownership and the claim to kinship resides with Doro, claiming not only Anyanwu's reproductive capabilities but also the lineage he creates with Anyanwu. Kinship is connected to this ownership in that all offspring, whether fathered by Doro, his sons, or a body he possesses, derive from Doro's direction, meaning that his vast lineage is carefully controlled. Even though the children Anyanwu bears, whether it be with Isaac, Doro, or another superhuman, reside with her until adulthood, Anyanwu cannot lay claim to her offspring. The children's purposes are to continue Doro's experiments, using them as property to expand to then gain more property. Simply, Anyanwu is a pawn, a woman of incredible powers who strengthens Doro's dynasty. To reclaim herself and her children, Anyanwu must practice fierce motherhood

to protect and preserve, giving her superhuman offspring the freedom to live without Doro's influence.

### **Fierce Motherhood as a Legacy**

Already almost three hundred years old prior to meeting Doro, Anyanwu has a lineage of 47 children and innumerable grandchildren. This large familial line creates a dynasty. However, despite Anyanwu's prolonged mortality, shape shifting capabilities, and healing powers, none of her children exhibit similar abilities. To both be near and protect her kin, Anyanwu shifts form and reinvents herself as the elderly mystical woman who lives outside her offspring's African village, thus maintaining anonymity for her own protection while also protecting her kin, staking an inexplicit claim of ownership over them. However, given Anyanwu's children's mortality, she outlives her offspring, meaning that she must constantly reinvent herself, evolve with new tribes, and either keep a distance from people or shift form and start over. Her children's mortality signifies that ownership of kin is limited and easily disrupted through death, thus necessitating Anyanwu's multiple reinventions. As such, she does not have one designated legacy or lineage. Instead, she has multiple lineages, all of which are attributed to different women. The dichotomy between mortality and Anyanwu's powers offers no permanence or preservation. Referring to Frampton's statement on black motherhood, that it is an empowering act for both the mother and the black community if the children receive nurturing and preservation, the notion of preservation plays an integral role. Preservation, in Frampton's context, refers to a black mother ensuring her child grows into adulthood. Taking it further, preservation relates back to the claim of kin, meaning that if the offspring is alive the black mother still has a claim. For Anyanwu, preservation takes a different meaning given her longevity. Preservation, in this instance,

involves possible immortality. To fiercely mother, Anyanwu must take lasting ownership of her kin, something Doro promises her upon their first meeting: “If you come with me, I think someday, I can show you children you will never have to bury...A mother should not have to watch her children grow old die...If you live, they should live. It is the fault of their fathers that they die. Let me give you children who will live!” (Butler 23). Claiming that he can provide her with children like her, Doro plays into what Anyanwu wants most, the preservation of her children’s lives. Doro’s offer is Anyanwu’s greatest chance at claiming her kin, a chance to mother for years to come and giving her the false hope that ownership is hers.

However, Anyanwu’s desire to claim ownership over her kin poses issues when considering the maternal slavery she experiences at the hands of Doro. Anyanwu is promised to marry Doro but is then married to Isaac, Doro’s son who lives in a seed colony in colonial New York. Not only does she bear Isaac’s children, she also gives birth to Doro’s offspring, always with a different body, as well as children from Doro’s other sons. Anyanwu also cannot claim her children, specifically as they, too, are controlled by Doro, meaning her legacy is not recognized. Essentially an instrument, Anyanwu is owned by Doro. He controls where she lives, when and who she reproduces with, and manipulates her children, like Nweke, to have sex with him and then subsequently control their reproductive relationships. With the absence of ownership of both self and kin, Anyanwu, through maternal enslavement, cannot avoid Doro’s will: “Doro had reshaped her. She had submitted and submitted and submitted to keep him from killing her even though she had long ago ceased to believe what Isaac had told her—that her longevity made her the right mate for Doro. That she could somehow prevent him from becoming an animal...she had formed the habit of submission” (Butler 179). Anyanwu becomes less of a person to him and is instead treated as a means to an end—to create his personal legacy

of superhumans capable of living forever. What can one do when confronted with the knowledge that their only value is their reproductive capabilities, their offspring will always be at the will of the oppressor, and that the legacy one was promised is not established? One evades. This evasion is an act of resistance in that Anyanwu claims herself and the futures of her children to avoid more trauma and to make her kin her own, specifically creating her own community, orchestrating her own resistance.

Fleeing Doro's New York colony, Anyanwu resists in three ways: she vigilantly shifts form to evade Doro, reproduces with both dolphins and humans, and creates her own community of kin on a plantation in Louisiana. These acts of resistance serve as a reclamation, meaning Anyanwu removes herself from Doro's ownership and can now, although in hiding, control her body and lay claim to her descendants. This resistance, however, comes with consequences, like the threat of death: "She had committed what was a great sin among his people: She had run away from him. It would not matter that she had done so to save her life—that she could see he meant to kill her. After all her submission, he still meant to kill her. He believed it was his right to slaughter among his people as he chose" (Butler 180). Knowing what may happen if she resists, Anyanwu shifts forms, becomes a bird, and flies away, removing herself from the immediate trauma. Her goal, after avoiding Doro as a dolphin and having dolphin offspring, an exercise of her newfound reproductive liberties, is to create a community for her kin. This creation of community is the integral aspect of Anyanwu's fierce motherhood, specifically because it is a place of resistance that for many years is unknown to Doro. This community, a plantation Anyanwu owns under the guise of an elderly white man named Edward Warrick, is a place where her most recent kin reside, thus giving her space to claim ownership of her kin and finally create her own legacy.

## **A Place of Resistance**

This space for resistance, however, poses an interesting dynamic, specifically considering the location of Anyanwu's new community. Anyanwu, a black woman, poses as a wealthy white man and uses a plantation, a historically disempowering location for black people, to start her own community. Anyanwu now claims ownership over kin through presenting herself as the oppressor. While Doro is still the actual oppressor, Anyanwu must find concrete ways to claim her kin while also protecting her ownership, like keeping her family from Doro's reach and claiming her reproductive rights. By shifting form and presenting as a wealthy white male, Anyanwu, on the surface, adheres to a classic power structure, assumes the role of privilege, and presents her kin as slaves. Despite this presentation of adherence to the white hegemony, Anyanwu spins the period to her advantage and uses legalized claims of ownership to ultimately protect her kin. Here, a plantation, a historically traumatic location, becomes a hideaway from continued trauma from Doro. Not only is this a symbolic reclamation, avoiding trauma by reclaiming a historically disempowering locale, it is also a large-scale location where a community can grow without garnering much attention.

As little attention is given to Anyanwu's colony, the plantation functions as a place of resistance, at least prior to Doro's arrival, in that no one living there is an actual slave. However, the complicated ties of ownership present difficulties, especially when considering Doro finds Anyanwu. If the discovered Anyanwu becomes Doro's property, her claim to ownership of kin is now negated because the owned themselves cannot hold a claim to ownership. Linking this to Spillers, specifically when she contends that "under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it," the kin colony no longer belongs to Anyanwu, especially as Doro demands he



bring his own offspring to the plantation, thus influencing the plantation and its residents (74). This infiltration of Anyanwu's home severs her ties to claim of kinship because Doro's arrival reverts her back to a form of maternal enslavement. Although she is told that she will not have to produce any future offspring with Doro, Anyanwu is expected to keep Doro's children in lieu of her freedom. The infiltration of the plantation creates issues with not only Anyanwu's claim to her family, but also the personal freedoms of the plantation's inhabitants, with Doro's son perpetuating sexual violence against Anyanwu's youngest daughter and killing Anyanwu's son Joseph. Although Doro is not always physically present, his offspring, functioning as his extension, seek to manipulate Anyanwu's kin, thus weakening her claim and making her community for kin suffer.

Although Anyanwu's plantation is founded as a site of resistance, her claims to ownership is only honored after she decides to commit suicide. Upon learning of this, Doro decides to compromise with Anyanwu, agreeing to no longer abuse her reproductive abilities, curb his killing sprees, and to protect his own offspring. On its surface, Anyanwu's decision to commit suicide appears as an act of resistance, specifically considering her prolonged mortality. In effect, Anyanwu intends to disregard what Doro values most, thus forfeiting her agency so that he can no longer do her harm. However, this action leaves her kin unprotected, which is counterintuitive to the establishment of her community. Once Doro convinces Anyanwu to not commit suicide through promising to no longer kill more humans, she joins forces with Doro, working with him to find more superhumans. This compromise allows Anyanwu to keep her claim to kin, thus maintaining her claim of ownership, but also makes her part of Doro's larger scheme. Anyanwu's decision to work with Doro creates a problematic area, showing how

compromise within a dominating power structure is utilized to gain some form of autonomy for the black mother and her offspring.

### **Fierce Motherhood and Its Claims**

The absence of power experienced by both Sethe and Anyanwu is the driving force of their respective mothering. Unable to claim themselves let alone their children, both women fiercely mother, responding to trauma—whether experienced or promised—to resist. In turn, power struggles are created, something both mothers work through to reclaim the ownership denied them. The ways Sethe and Anyanwu respond to these challenges and claim ownership over themselves and their kin reveal their fierce motherhood. Through the struggle of violence and the creation of communities, both mothers ensure the futures of their children—to avoid similar fates.

## CHAPTER 3

### A SHARED HERSTORY: BLACK MATRIARCHY IN CRYSTAL

#### WILKINSON'S *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*

The first two chapters address two theoretical concepts—progressive and fierce motherhoods. Progressive motherhood is concerned with a black woman's decision to enter maternity in ways advantageous to her whereas fierce motherhood serves as a mode of maternity that seeks to claim ownership over both the body and kin. Both frameworks serve as ways to examine and further understand black motherhood, but these analyses do not address a tense subject discussed in the “Moynihan Report” (1965)—black matriarchies. This third chapter, analyzing Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* (2016), is inspired by Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and serves to refute Moynihan's contention that the black matriarchal structure is a devastation to both the black family and the black mother and that black matriarchs emasculate men. This perception of failure is rooted in both racism and sexism, specifically in that a white hegemony does not wish for black women to rise above their subjugated roles. The desire for suppression creates the space for Moynihan's research that devalues the importance of black mothers, blaming matriarchies for what society has created. To combat these misrepresentations, it is necessary to conduct critical examinations of black matriarchies to exhibit multiplicity and understand black motherhood as “both dynamic and dialectical” (Collins 176).

To dismantle this monolithic view of black matriarchies, *The Birds of Opulence*, a novel concerned with the lives of four black women—a great-grandmother, grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter—and their dealings with their community and men, serves as an example of the complexity of black motherhood in that the four women each experience the world

differently, with experiences of maternity, mental illness, and rape serving as prevalent themes. In turn, the women, through their experiences, create “lifetimes of stories [that] are stacked up one on top of the other,” making a shared history (Wilkinson 97). These collective experiences are the formative elements of their family, informing their relationships and understandings of the world. Through a close analysis of the Goode-Brown women, I argue that contrary to what Moynihan claims, the black matriarchy in *The Birds of Opulence* is a means of shared experiences and survival, allowing the black mothers to develop union within their lineage and to create a community of understanding.

### **Black Matriarchies and Their Connotations**

Matriarchy, a social organization that places emphasis of influence and lineage on the maternal figure, has experienced conflicting definitions when applied to black women, with some scholars attributing qualities of the “superstrong Black mother” as positive while others rely on the damaging representation of emasculation perpetuated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Collins 174). These opposing understandings allow for a dichotomous view of black mothers—devoted mother and the mother who degrades the family unit. Both are unfair characterizations in that they do not afford narratives in which black mothers do what they feel necessary to protect and care for their families. This absence of realistic portrayals of black mothers in relation to their families does not allow us to understand the actual configurations of black matriarchies.

To first breakdown this dichotomy and its inadequate representation, first consider the trope of the “superstrong Black mother” outlined in *Black Feminist Thought*:

...many African American [male] thinkers tend to glorify Black motherhood...by claiming that Black women are richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and

unconditional love—the attributes associated with archetypal motherhood. U.S. black men inadvertently foster a different albeit seemingly positive image for Black women. The controlling image of the “superstrong Black mother” praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers. Yet, in order to remain on their pedestal, these same superstrong Black mothers must continue to place their needs behind those of everyone else, especially their sons. (Collins 174)

This archetype outlined by Collins exhibits what may be considered the perfect mother, one devoted, doting, and loving. Self-sacrifice is integral to this construction. The notion of self-sacrifice ignores the needs or desires of black mothers and instead forces the black mother to focus her energy solely on her family, specifically her male family members. Here, motherhood does not benefit the black mother so much as it does the men of her life. This creates the implicit message that although the black mother may be doing much, if not all, of the domestic and familial work, men are still the integral feature of the family structure, which is also discussed in the larger body of feminist (and black feminist) scholarship that argues similar ideas about the self-sacrificing mother. It is the mother who is expected to devote energy in ensuring the wellbeing of the family, meaning that her mental and emotional health, and aspirations are not considered to be of high importance. It is this expected level of self-sacrifice that demands unfair expectations and further perpetuates male superiority. This portrayal does not make a strong mother. Rather, it creates a disadvantaged mother stretched thin between domestic labor, emotional support, and suppression of self.

Whereas the caricature of the superstrong Black mother reasserts the emphasis on men’s needs, Moynihan, in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as the “Moynihan Report,” argues that matriarchies are both the detriment of black families and emasculate black men, an idea refuted by Hortense Spillers. Spillers says, “According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s celebrated ‘Report’ of the late sixties, the ‘Negro Family’ has no father to

speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the ‘Report’ maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line” (65-66). Here, Spillers contends that Moynihan presents black women, specifically matriarchies, as the downfall of black families, noting that Moynihan views black men (fathers) as missing figures. Moynihan sets forth the idea that black women hold control over families, which, as Spillers points out, is counterintuitive to the historical subjugation of black women. Whereas the notion of the superstrong Black mother elevates men and caters to their whims and needs, Moynihan’s view of the black family positions men as disadvantaged. Both ends of this dichotomy, however, do not consider the subjugation of black women, meaning that the hegemonic constraints placed upon women’s gender, sexuality, and race are ignored, thus solely focusing on the needs of male family members. Black mothers, although positioned as the foundation of their families, are fundamentally misunderstood, either receiving praise for sacrificing everything, despite their detriment, for male relatives or villainized as emasculators and destroyers of the family unit.

To move past these damaging constructions, a combination of theorists’ work must be created to give nuance to the black matriarchal structure. This nuance relates to the idea of the multiplicity of black mothering, specifically that to generalize black matriarchies is of no use. Rather, it is pertinent to examine the cultural history of black women, the family structure, and the ways in which black women are subjugated into the role of mother. It is through this analysis that black matriarchies are considered as a site of shared history and experiences.

## Shared Experiences

*The Birds of Opulence*, a novel featuring the protagonists Minnie Mae (great-grandmother), Tookie (grandmother), Lucy (mother), and Yolanda (granddaughter), shows a black matriarchy in action. In a reading of the novel, understanding black maternity, issues pertaining to rape, and mental health are crucial to understanding the significance of this specific black matriarchy, displaying how a shared history is the thread of this familial bond.

In this connection of shared history and black matriarchy lies a tie to violence—rape. As Angela Davis asserts, “Rape, sexual extortion, battering, spousal rape, sexual abuse of children, and incest are among the many forms of overt sexual violence suffered by millions of women in this country” (37). This issue is further confounded by race, with black women at higher risk: “A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily ‘loose’ in their morals and, therefore deserved none of the consideration and respect granted white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology” (qtd. in Davis). As Davis notes the prevalence of rape and also asserts the stigma attached to black women’s sexualities, it is evident that both sexual assault and control are a reality of black women’s lives. This fear, when combined with maternity, shapes how the black mother instructs her daughter to safeguard her body and how rape impacts the structure of the family: “Young black girls were admonished by concerned parents to avoid walking down isolated streets and to avoid contact with white men whenever possible” (hooks 56). While bell hooks writes of the vigilance young black women practice with white men, this is applicable to rape prevention at large, especially considering what Davis contends above—that this is a problem experienced by millions of women and is especially significant when rape results in pregnancy. Given lack of access to legal abortions and emergency birth control due largely to time and socioeconomic differences, the

black woman is left with few options other than maternity. The violent entrance into maternity, although impacting the mother most, also affects the family, forcing sexist notions, like victim blaming, to the surface while also collectively caring for the child. As such, rape impacts the family, making this a shared history.

Considering both racist myths of black female sexuality and the realities of rape, when maternity is entered without marriage, especially when one is a teenager, like the experience of Tookie, patriarchal views of sexuality are called upon. The stigma of rape and the shame perpetuated against unwed black mothers sometimes facilitates the desire to alter the narrative and present a different perspective, motherhood as a mark of value, something bell hooks further explains in *Ain't I a Woman?*: “Many black women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood. As participants in the ‘cult of true womanhood’ that reached its peak in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, they endeavored to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family” (hooks 70). This “cult of true womanhood” serves as a policing of sorts, forcing black women to conform to what the white hegemonic decrees is the accepted form of femininity. This feminine ideology further subjugates the black mother. This ideology tells black women that their families are their lives’ centers, making domesticity a requirement. Not only is this a race issue, one that forces black women to prove themselves to a white hegemony, it is also a class issue in that by telling black women that their lives must focus on their families it also creates the notion that a member of the “cult of true womanhood” cannot work outside the home, which is not a privilege often afforded to black women. Already distorting black women’s sexualities, this notion others the black women who cannot afford to not work. It creates the problematic notion of determining a mother’s womanhood. When the notion of the perfect



mother, like Collins' superstrong Black mother, is applied to the family, it creates a shared toxic femininity, one that imparts to the female members that there is only one way to be a woman. The monolithic view of womanhood becomes a shared history, sexist ideals passed from one generation to the next.

Alongside the insidiousness of rape and sexism is mental illness. Mental illness, as Spillers notes, is not suffered alone: "Who is the subject of treatment? In the African context, there are no lone subjects of mental illness" (716). While Spillers refers to Africans, the applicability of mental illness's effects on both the person and the family is particularly relevant to African Americans. Considering both cultural and social stigmas concerning mental illnesses, like postpartum depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder, and its impact on gender, mental illness, although experienced by the specific person, impacts the entire family, especially when suffered by the black mother in a society that expects a variation of the superstrong Black mother. The perpetuation of the superstrong Black mother creates an issue because if the black mother subscribes to the cult of true womanhood, therefore putting the needs of men and her family before her own, then mental illness goes ignored. This negatively impacts the mother and further extends the notion to her daughters and other female descendants that there is shame in having a mental illness. Further, the stigmas surrounding mental health impacts one's mothering, informing how the black mother raises her offspring. Like the side effects of rape and patriarchal standards, mental illness also creates a shared history among matriarchies in that the illness is treated like a secret and continues to go untreated.

As matriarchies are a shared history, combining the experiences of societal expectations, rape, and mental illness, Wilkinson symbolizes this connection to the past through bird imagery, specifically a Sankofa on the book's cover. A Sankofa is "the image...of a bird with its head

turned so that its beak touches its back. In Akan, the term and symbol mean *se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi* (it is no taboo to fetch something which has been forgotten)—return to the past in order to go forward” (Grayson 26). The Sankofa symbolizes the need to return to the past to progress, meaning that one must learn from history before succeeding in the present. The image of a Sankofa fits with the shared histories of matriarchies in that the past is a collective experience, meaning that even though the great-granddaughter has not participated in the same memories as her elders, the memory is still hers to visit. She may use that experience as an example, learning what not to do. These memories are informed by the experiences of maternity, rape, and mental illness. As the Sankofa symbolizes an opportunity to look back, it also allows women in the matriarchal structure to gain better understandings of one another, allowing explanations for the past. In turn, Sankofa creates a connection—a history of family.

### **Assault and Maternity as Shared History**

To situate black matriarchies as a shared history, *The Birds of Opulence* takes place in rural Kentucky between 1962 and 1995, focusing on the lives of Minnie Mae, Nora Jean (Tookie), Lucy, and Yolanda and the bond they share, and exhibits black matriarchies not as the destruction of the family but instead a lineage of women whose lives are intertwined. This intertwinement exhibits the ways history is shared and how the transgressions of men, like rape, and hegemonic expectations impact a matriarchy, especially when they are perpetuated against teenage girls, like Tookie. Tookie is thirteen when she gives birth to Lucy. Tookie’s pregnancy is the result of a rape by Bruce Harrison, an older man. Here, Bruce lures Tookie to a cornfield, promising her affection and gentleness. Instead, “it had hurt like nothing she had ever known” (Wilkinson 140). Tying this back to Davis, specifically her assertion, “Rape, sexual extortion,

battering, spousal rape, sexual abuse of children, and incest are among the many forms of overt sexual violence suffered by millions of women in this country,” it is evident that Tookie’s traumatic experience with rape is part of a larger cultural issue (37). The notion that Tookie is raped, especially considering her young age, is not discussed by Minnie Mae, meaning that she both explicitly and implicitly lays blame on Tookie, not the aggressor. That Minnie Mae does not consider rape as a possibility and instead assumes that Tookie is promiscuous speaks to her shared history with the patriarchy she grew up in, meaning that the shared beliefs of black women’s hypersexuality, heavily perpetuated during her own upbringing, still influences her.

This perpetuation of black women’s hypersexuality speaks to two larger issues, specifically in the way black female sexuality and maternity are understood. First, consider Minnie Mae’s reaction when learning of Tookie’s pregnancy:

...Minnie Mae said. “I didn’t raise you to be a whore” then the strap of the belt... “Knew enough to spread your legs. Knew that didn’t you?” Each word came with the lash on her back. With her back turned to protect the baby, she couldn’t see her mother’s face, but she could hear her labored breathing. Heard the shuffle of footsteps behind her when her daddy tried to pull the belt from her mama’s hands. (Wilkinson 140-41)

Minnie does not ask Tookie about the pregnancy, like the name of the father or what happened. Instead, she reacts violently when realizing Tookie’s pregnancy and beats her with a belt. This reaction, calling Tookie a whore and then beating her, is symptomatic of a larger issue—the notion of the “bad” black woman. There are perimeters of the myth of the bad black woman, specifically that black women have loose morals and higher sexual drives, and is arguably enforced by Minnie Mae:

By assuming a different level of sexuality for all Blacks than that of whites and mythifying their greater sexual potency, the black woman could be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily ‘loose’ in their morals and, therefore

deserved none of the consideration and respect granted white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault her and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behaviors. (qtd. in *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* 59)

Minnie Mae internalizes this myth, forcing herself to compartmentalize her sexuality and instead focus on maternity, trying to prove to both herself and others that she, too, is not what the white hegemony believes black women to be, something Minnie Mae had to combat as a young teenager trying to protect her virginity: “Brought on fighting Macon Jones one year during hog-killing time when she was twelve, wrestling him for her own honey pot. She’d won, though—still a virgin when she married” (Wilkinson 26). This vigilance for virginity signifies her response to Tookie’s response—that to lose one’s virginity before marriage is a sign of weakness and impurity. When Minnie Mae learns that Tookie is pregnant, her first assumption is not that her thirteen-year-old daughter, a person unable to give consent, has been hurt. Instead, “she kept beating and beating, trying to beat Tookie back into good, looked down at red ridges rising up on her pregnant child’s legs and back and kept beating. Tookie a mound of whipped flesh with big old sad eyes. She still remembers them old eyes. Was it fear or hate? *Ain't it a mama's job to protect? Protect who?*” (Wilkinson 84). Here, it is asked who Minnie tries to protect—her daughter or herself. Minnie lashes out at Tookie because of the reputation she will garner as the grandmother of a grandchild born out of wedlock, making rape the defining element of Tookie’s entrance into both womanhood and maternity, which in turn creates a precedent for the occurrence of pregnancy before marriage, something Lucy, too, experiences.

Minnie Mae’s violent reaction to Tookie’s pregnancy is rooted in what hooks says about the cult of true womanhood: “Many black women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood...they endeavored to prove

their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family” (hooks). Tookie’s pregnancy not only violates the shift from the depiction of the sexually active black women to devoted mother (a convention that necessitates a husband figure), but also, from Minnie’s perspective, reflects on Minnie as a mother and how she views pre-marital sex. Considering what this cult of true womanhood entails, the ideals of the superstrong Black mother dictate that black mothers sacrifice themselves to their families. This sacrifice, in turn, gives the black mother a visible accomplishment of a well-behaved family, thus subverting racist expectations of the black family. Simply, it is a compliance with hegemonic ideals, one whose aim is to regulate the family and police female sexuality. This construction of perfect motherhood creates problems, specifically in that its aims are to distance itself from blatant sexuality. This appearance of the cult of true womanhood is disrupted when sex and its components are not discussed, leaving young black girls misinformed, much like Tookie after her rape: “Minnie hadn’t told her about babies, but Tookie knew she was pregnant the way any woman knows. Her menses stopped, breasts grew swollen, sickness came. Baby in there” (Wilkinson 140). Although Minnie takes no other measures in aiding her daughter’s sexual education other than telling her not to spread her legs, Tookie instinctually understands that she is pregnant. This lack of education is attributed to how the cult of true womanhood views sexual activity—an activity only learned and practiced through marriage, something Minnie reflects upon, muttering, “Not a blasted one...Ain’t nary woman in this town got the sense that the good Lord gave them. Opening up them legs anytime a feeling hits. Keep them legs closed and everything will be alright” (Wilkinson 86). Any deviance from this standard ultimately villainizes the black woman and reflects poorly upon the woman’s mother, placing blame with

the matriarch, which is the source of Minnie's anger. Minnie's anger calls her status as a superstrong Black mother into question.

It is Minnie's reputation and shame that serves as the basis of this shared history. Tookie is Minnie's only daughter, which plays a significant role in Minnie's feelings of humiliation, "wishing nobody have ever said Minnie Mae Goode's girl turned bad" (Wilkinson 85). This shame comes at the detriment of both her daughter and her newly born granddaughter, Lucy: "She was glad that the baby was born at night, when nobody could see. Henry tried to persuade her to take Tookie to colored hospital, but she wouldn't. Wanted Tookie to go through every single bit of suffering, her punishment for what she'd done" (Wilkinson 85). Using the pain of childbirth to punish Tookie, Minnie not only harms her daughter by not allowing her to go to the hospital and instead experience nine hours of labor on the bathroom floor, but also imparts the idea to her daughter that motherhood is a burden and something to be suffered. Motherhood, in this instance, is constructed as a requirement that must be endured, which is influenced by shared history. Considering the emphasis of the cult of true womanhood, particularly treating motherhood as an obligation, maternity is seen as something to be endured for the greater good of the family, which is an idea carried further into the twentieth century by Minnie Mae. This refusal to take Tookie to the hospital is also a way to prevent others from knowing right away that Tookie is now a mother, which is done not to shield Tookie from criticism and disdain but instead for Minnie's own reputation. Minnie's refusal to hospitalize Tookie is a way to salvage Minnie's performance of superstrong Black mother, all of which is supposed to make her look acceptable in both Opulence and the white hegemony. Without that appearance of respectability, Minnie fears she will be viewed as a failure of a mother.

This combination of rape and maternity is a shared history of this matriarchy in that the fear of pregnancy outside of marriage runs as a prevalent theme, with these worries applied to both Lucy and Yolanda: “She [Minnie Mae] thinks of all her babies...She wonders if a girl child will ever understand what she is getting herself into when her hips start to show” (Wilkinson 86). When Minnie warns Tookie of Lucy’s sexual maturity, Tookie does not take her seriously: “But Tookie didn’t do a thing...And Minnie Mae’s foretelling came true. At eighteen, Lucy was two months along when she stood up in white lace and baby’s breath, but at least that time there was a wedding in somebody’s church. Nowadays seem like they dropping like rabbits, them fatherless babies all over the place” (Wilkinson 86). Here, the fear of not subscribing to societal standards of motherhood is made apparent. Lucy, although not raped by John Goode, enters marriage because she is pregnant. One interpretation may be that Lucy simply does not subscribe to the standards followed by her grandmother. However, the better analysis, one that falls in line with the symbolism of Sankofa, is that through this matriarchy and its history, Lucy is able to look back and see the punishment and shame suffered by Tookie and her inability to follow the societal standards of reproduction and marriage and then use that example and the prejudices of her grandmother to make her own decision—to not remain abstinent and choose marriage as a safety to save her child, Kevin, from being born a bastard. Here, it is the familial knowledge, like the antiquated views of sexuality and the stigmas of unwed mothers, that allows Lucy to make her own choice, learning from history to start a family on her own terms.

### **Mental Illness and the Familial Connection**

Rape and maternity and their intersections are crucial in understanding the shared history of the Brown-Goode matriarchy, but mental illness, too, plays a significant role between mother

and daughter, with Lucy and Yolanda both dealing with its side effects. As Spillers contends, “Who is the subject of treatment? In the African context, there are no lone subjects of mental illness” (716). Although writing about mental illness among West Africans, Spillers makes a critical point—that mental illness is prevalent and that one person does not suffer alone. While there are undoubtedly experiences where a person with mental illness is isolated, there are also the shared experiences of mental illness among families. Mental illness is confounded when the illness itself is not recognized by society. In the instance of Lucy’s adult life, her mental illness is not taken seriously by those in the matriarchy, creating a rift of misunderstanding between the women. This disconnect is first apparent after Yolanda’s birth when Lucy suffers from postpartum depression. When Lucy, days after giving birth to Yolanda, lies in bed, does not wish to leave her room, wishes to only sleep, and refuses to breastfeed, thus exhibiting symptoms of postpartum depression, is called “crazy” by Tookie, with Tookie telling the newborn Yolanda, “Crazy. Good thing we got bottles boiled and ready, cause your mama’s crazy” (Wilkinson 25). This notion of craziness positions Lucy as irrational, positioning her as unsympathetic and uncooperative.

Here, there is a discord between the novel’s mothers—all women who have given birth to more than one child. It would be assumed that an understanding of the difficulties of post-birth recuperation would encourage empathetic behavior. However, given, the time period, 1962, discussions of mental health and understandings of postpartum depression are minimal. Rather than allow Lucy the care she needs, Minnie depends upon the shared history of maternity and forces her granddaughter to breastfeed Yolanda: “Minnie Mae puts a cold rag to Lucy’s forehead, then presses down her arms hard enough to leave a bruise. Lucy thrashes, cries out ‘No!’ again and again, tries to cover her head with the sheet. Tookie holds her feet, her own



stomach in knots, a sick feeling coming quickly, no matter how hard she tries to calm her nerves” (Wilkinson 26). This brute act is justified because Minnie believes “cow milk’s for cows” (Wilkinson 26). Minnie’s emphasis on breastfeeding is where the ideology of the superstrong Black mother and the stigma of mental illness intersect. To meet the ideals of the perfect mother, breastfeeding is a culturally important aspect. It serves as a signifier of a mother’s ability to provide for her child. When Lucy is unable to do so, her maternity is put into question and is then labeled as “crazy.” It is the shared history of understanding breastfeeding as the key component for a mother to care for her child that pushes Minnie to disbelieve Lucy’s illness and force her to feed. This misunderstanding of mental illness and the pressures of being a strong mother who puts others’ needs before her own creates a disconnect and allows little room for sympathy.

This experience with mental illness is not exclusive to Lucy. Yolanda follows a similar path. Married young, although not due to pregnancy, and suffering from mental illness, she, too, faces disbelief. Joe, considering life after Lucy’s suicide in 1995, questions what he could have done: “*Kitchen ghosts*, she’d call them. Kept saying, ‘Mama gone. Granny gone. Roots still here.’ For the life of him he still doesn’t know what she meant. Must’ve been her mind talking. Them pills didn’t do any good. And then Yolanda with those spells, those *panic attacks* as she calls them. He wonders if he might’ve brought this on his family somehow” (Wilkinson 195). The italicization of panic attacks indicates a disbelief on Joe’s part. While Joe’s disbelief is largely attributed to misunderstandings and ignorance of the workings of mental illness, Yolanda’s articulation of her symptoms is also indicative of Yolanda looking to the past and learning from her mother. Mental illness is often hereditary. In terms of the Sankofa imagery, Yolanda recognizes her own mother’s issues and seeks to learn more about her illness, showing

that she saw her mother suffer from a largely undiagnosed illness and wishes to be proactive for her own health. Through Joe's language used to describe her symptoms, panic attacks, it is indicative that Yolanda has learned from the past and wishes to destigmatize the illness and live with a diagnosis. Yolanda exhibits an agency not afforded to her mother. Although Joe shows an incredulousness of sorts, Yolanda does what she needs to do in order to survive, keeping the matriarchy alive.

### **Herstory**

There is no one way to be a mother. There is also no specific way to maintain a matriarchy. Despite the hegemonic depictions of black mothers, either the superstrong Black mother who puts the needs of others before her own, often to her detriment, or emasculators who work to undermine the black family, there is indeed a multiplicity to black matriarchies. The multiplicity of the maternal structure is made evident through the shared histories of a black family's matriarchy. Black matriarchies are informed by societal standards, like maternity, violence, and mental illness, all applicable to *The Birds of Opulence*. This shared history is symbolized through a Sankofa—the notion that one can look to the past and learn from those experiences. Shared history creates a collective understanding, one where black mothers and their daughters may understand and learn, making the black mother the integral, compelling feature.

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**APPENDIX A**

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER**



Office of Research Integrity

February 6, 2017

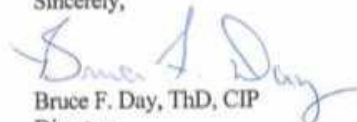
Nathan Full  
2920 4<sup>th</sup> Ave., Apt 3  
Huntington, WV 25702

Dear Mr. Full:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract to examine the intersections of queer and critical race theories and their applicability to Black women's relationships with motherhood, specifically in futuristic and fantastical societies created by both Octavia Butler and FKA twigs, looking at motherhood as both progressive and regressive choices. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,



Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
Director

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Full & Hupp CPAs, Inc.

#### Conference Presentations

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#### Publications

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#### Professional Memberships

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