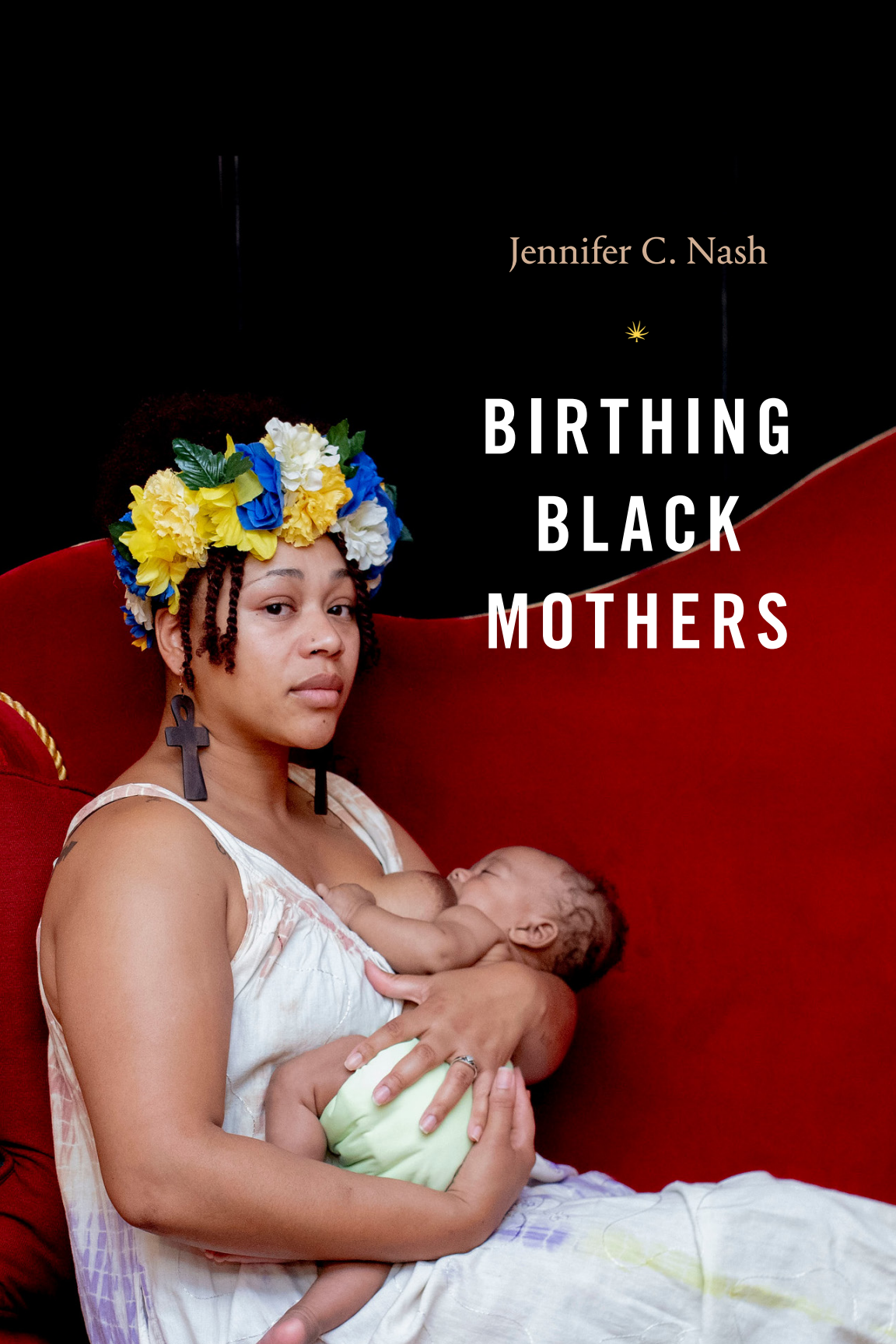
Jennifer C. Nash



BIRTHING BLACK MOTHERS

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FOR YEARS,
I'VE CRIED FOR OTHER
WOMEN'S CHILDREN.

Valerie Castile

Contents

Acknowledgments

I have lived much of the last ten years on the move. The question "where are you from?" has become a fraught one as I rattle off the list of cities that have been home—or that have promised the feeling of home. This book has been my traveling companion through Chicago, Cambridge, and Durham, even though it was actually born on a cold January morning in a delivery room in Rockville, Maryland, with the birth of my daughter. I come to this project as Naima Ahmad Nash's mother and as Carolyn Nash's daughter. Our entangled lives are not outside of the terrain this book maps, and so it is no coincidence that I was drawn to this project after my daughter was born, and that it was written with a fierce desire for my mother to hold this book in her hands, and to know that she was in my mind and heart as I worked.

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INTRODUCTION

The Afterlives of Malaysia Goodson, or Black Mothering in Crisis

Malaysia Goodson spent a January evening in 2019 shopping in Manhattan. When she and her one-year-old daughter, Rhylee, arrived at the subway station at 53rd Street and 7th Avenue, Goodson discovered that the station, like so many of New York City's subway stations, had no elevator. So when she reached the flight of stairs that would lead her to the crowded platform, she clutched Rhylee in one arm, lifted Rhylee's stroller in her other arm, and began her descent.[1] Goodson's unconscious body was discovered a few minutes later at the bottom of the stairwell, with Rhylee safely resting beneath her. By the time Goodson was transported to the hospital, she was already dead.[2] In the weeks that followed, her death became a symbol of bureaucratic callousness, a testament to the city's crumbling infrastructure and failure to provide accessible transportation, and an emblem of the invisibility of Black mothers, particularly poor Black mothers, in public spaces.[3] If Goodson's daily life was spent navigating invisibility, the very invisibility that could allow others to walk past as she struggled to carry a stroller and a baby down the crowded subway stairs, in death, she was publicly celebrated as a hero, as a mother who transformed

FIGURE I.1. Protesters in New York City in March 2019. Their protest was to honor Malaysia Goodson and to advocate for subway accessibility. Courtesy of Erik McGregor.

her body into a human shield to protect her child. Indeed, the media read Goodson's final moments as a sign of her deep commitment to her daughter, a conception of the heroic labor of the Black maternal as, in Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's words, "standing at the mouth of a grave with defiant feet and balled fists refusing to let my [child] come or fall in."[4]

Three months later, in April 2019, aspiring Democratic Party presidential nominee Elizabeth Warren participated in "She the People," a forum for women of color voters. Warren, who had developed a reputation for her detailed policy recommendations (her campaign slogan was "I have a plan for that"), unveiled her newest innovation. If Black women are three to four times more likely to die during childbirth, Warren suggested that the state provide hospitals with financial incentives to improve health outcomes for Black mothers specifically. She said, "Doctors and nurses don't hear African American women's issues the same way that they hear things from white women. We gotta change that and we gotta change it fast because people's lives are at stake."[5] Later that week, in an essay published in *Essence* magazine, Warren elaborated on her proposal, noting, "Black women shouldn't have to develop elaborate birth plans or personally shell out thousands of dollars for extra eyes and ears at the hospital to ensure they survive the experience of childbirth."[6] Warren was hailed both

for making Black maternal health a campaign issue and for her investment in offering a clear policy intervention designed to safeguard Black maternal life.

Over the course of 2019, Malaysia Goodson's name traveled far from New York City, via national and even international media, as a symbol of Black maternal trauma and heroism. Presidential candidates, including Warren and Kamala Harris, wielded the specter of Black maternal death as a sign of their commitment to the multiply marginalized; as Kirsten Gillibrand reminded viewers during one Democratic debate, "I sat down with Eric Garner's mother, and I can tell you when you've lost your son, when he's begged for breath, when you know because you have a video, when you know he said, 'I can't breathe' so many times, over and over again, when you know he used an illegal chokehold, that person should be fired."[7] Black mothers were figured as the memory-keepers of slain Black children—particularly Black boys—and as always braced for inevitable future violence. They were icons of trauma, grief, heroism, and death "trotted" out by an array of figures on the US Left as "the ultimate example of how bad things are."[8] And Black mothers emphatically placed themselves in the public sphere to speak about the antiBlack conditions that were killing their children and to advocate for their needs, including perhaps the most basic need—for "More Life."[9] In so doing, they rendered motherhood a powerful vehicle for making visible a set of conditions that has long been, and continues to be, wholly unlivable for Black people.

If Black mothers have become politically legible because of their newly visible but long-standing proximity to their dead children, they have also recently entered the public consciousness in a new way. Not simply proximate to their children's anticipated death, Black mothers are now imagined as themselves occupying death-worlds because of their distinct vulnerability to a decidedly not-new condition: medical racism and obstetric violence. For instance, Linda Villarosa's 2018 *New York Times* magazine long-form article, which documented a "life-or-death crisis" facing Black mothers and infants, was picked up by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), *Truthout*, *Mother Jones*, and *Democracy Now*; was cited by state legislatures as they formed task forces to respond to the crisis of Black maternal health; and also inaugurated a year of significant coverage of Black maternal health in nearly every major US newspaper.[10] Collectively, that outpouring of journalistic work amplified a singular point: racism is responsible for the deadly health outcomes that Black mothers and children experience. Writing a year after Villarosa's widely circulated exposé, Amy Roeder starkly noted, "For Black women far more than for white women, giving birth can amount to a death sentence. . . . Their odds of surviving childbirth are comparable to those of women in countries such

as Mexico and Uzbekistan, where significant proportions of the population live in poverty."[11] The attention to staggeringly high Black maternal and infant mortality rates led scholars and activists to describe institutionalized medicine as "failing its Black mothers," and politicians and activists devoted sustained rhetorical attention to the plight of Black mothers and their vulnerable children.[12] This journalistic work—often informed by the critical innovations of Black feminists working under the banner of reproductive justice—has amplified a singular point: Black mothers are in crisis.

Birthing Black Mothers probes a moment where the long-standing conditions of the ordinary have been newly framed as a crisis and where Black motherhood itself has become a site of cultural interest, empathy, fascination, support, and seemingly benign regulation both by the biopolitical state and by Black feminists as they have collaborated to figure Black mothers as living *in* crisis. This book argues that Black mothers in the United States have become spectacularly and dangerously visible through the frame of crisis, one that insists on their spatial and temporal location in a death-world that is described as reminiscent of the nation's imagined past, even as it is consistent with the conditions of the unfolding present. While crisis has made the precarity of Black mothering newly visible—if not remediable—it has also tethered Black maternal flesh to disorder, even if it is not the disorder of earlier eras, namely pathology and poverty. It is precisely because Black motherhood is now cast as suffering rather than pathological, as tragic rather than self-destructive, as traumatized rather than deviant, that the crisis frame can be both deeply seductive and rhetorically effective. Yet the rhetoric of crisis is part of an enduring and troubling tradition of rendering Black women generally, and Black mothers specifically, into symbols, even if now Black mothers are symbols of tragic heroism rather than deviance.

Birthing Black Mothers traces how the crisis frame has transformed Black mothers into a distinct form of Left political currency during the era of Black Lives Matter (BLM). Black mothers become political currency when the category "Black mother" comes to refer not to a form of relationality, a set of practices, a form of labor, or an embodied experience, but instead to a political category that is a synonym for pain. In naming Black mothers as Left currency, I track how Black mothers are invoked by politicians like Warren and Gillibrand and how Black feminists invoke Black mothers to describe the racism inherent to institutionalized medicine. I study how Black feminist ethics—like reproductive justice—have become Left talking points, so that politicians like Warren can make claims like "the women of color who have championed the reproductive justice movement teach us that we must go beyond choice to ensure meaning-

ful access for every woman in America—not just the privileged and wealthy few."[13] Thus the book traces how Black mothers generally, and birthing Black mothers particularly, have become a political category, a woke credential, mobilized by a variety of actors on the US Left. Of course, the relegation of Black mothers to the realm of the symbolic has been inherent to the US project of race-making since the nation's inception. What is distinctive about the political moment that constitutes the backdrop of my analysis is that Black mothers are figured as bodies that warrant compassion, education, and support because of their proximity to death, because they are living *in* crisis.

In describing the rhetoric of crisis as generating a distinctly Left form of currency, I remain acutely conscious of how the US Right has also rendered Black mothers as a kind of political currency, one that secures narratives of Black pathology in a moment where, as Laura Briggs convincingly argues, "All politics have become reproductive politics."[14] I see the work of the US Left's investment in crisis rhetoric as a different kind of political labor, even as it is one that I subject to critical scrutiny. As the US Left "responds" to the antiBlackness, misogyny, and transphobia of the Trump administration and to the sea of nonindictments and nonconvictions of state officials who have slain Black people, Black mothers are a valuable currency that can confer Left bona fides on the speaker who selectively invokes them. When members of Mothers of the Movement appeared onstage at the 2016 Democratic National Convention to confer their support to Hillary Clinton, when Kamala Harris and Kirsten Gillibrand each insisted on recounting the details of their conversations with Eric Garner's mother during a Democratic debate in 2019 (Harris insisted, "Now, I would like to also talk about this conversation about Eric Garner, because I, *too*, met with his mother"), Black mothers—particularly suffering Black mothers—are visibly a kind of political commodity, one that, simply by being referenced, can provide moral authority for those who speak their names.[15]

Black mothers are thus objects of Left political value and symbolic support because of their imagined location at the nexus of dual crises—navigating the intersecting forces of medical racism and state-sanctioned violence that render Black life vulnerable. I use the term *symbolic support* to underscore that I see neither the brief outrage surrounding Goodson's death nor Warren's policy proposals as producing meaningful changes in the lives and experiences of Black mothers. Instead, Black mothers are simply invoked as bodies that signify and inhabit crisis, that are always "standing at the mouth" of their children's graves. The US Left has, then, tethered Black mothers to a new set of "controlling images" that center trauma and injury, bringing Black mothers into view only through their capacity to stand for brokenness of a different kind.[16] Black

feminism is not outside the project of rendering Black mothers as symbols, even as it has engaged in that endeavor benignly, in a collective effort to secure Black mothers' bodily autonomy and sexual freedom. Indeed, the labor of making Black motherhood political, making the birthing Black mother a political subject rather than an embodied position, is often forged in the name of Black feminist praxis and its commitments to reproductive justice and birth equity.

Birthing Black Mothers defines the moment when Black mothers have been refigured not as pathological but as living in crisis, as a central and undertheorized part of the ongoing BLM era. If it remains the case that Black boys and men are described as the icons of the BLM social movement, this book tells a different story, arguing that Black mothers have come to be the centerpiece of BLM's political project, the primary symbol around which the quest for Black life has been made visible. This book argues that Black mothers' capacity to stand for pain and to engender support rather than condemnation is most visible in two archives—public health and aesthetics—which have both been shaped and remade by the political imperative of BLM. Even as I critically engage the symbolic and rhetorical traffic around Black mothers' lives, I hold on to the material reality of Black mothers' (and children's) disproportionate deaths, the deathly outcomes of antiBlack obstetric violence, which connect Black mothers across class lines. As Dána-Ain Davis notes, "The distance between poor, low-income, and middle-class and professional Black women's birth outcomes is a short one. The class structure in US society is ostensibly a strategy for accessing sets of privilege that supposedly transcend race and racism. Of course, we know that is not the case."[17] What unites Black mothers is an intimate proximity to noncare that can manifest itself in an array of ways, ranging from medical indifference to forced Cesarean sections, from encouragement to *not* reproduce to systemic neglect of Black women's pain. This project is deeply committed to doing justice to that reality outside the realm of the symbolic or the rhetorical. Thus, I document the myriad ways that Black mothers and children experience medicalized violence, and I consider the complex ways Black feminists might envision new forms of freedom for Black mothers, including freedom from the rhetoric of crisis and the weight of the symbolic.

Black Maternal Politics

In considering how Black mothers forge political work in, through, and against the rhetoric of crisis, and in studying how actors on the Left take up Black motherhood as a symbol of trauma and brokenness, this book advances the

term *Black maternal politics*. I develop my understanding of Black maternal politics mindful of how Black women have strategically and historically used motherhood as a platform for activism, perhaps most spectacularly during the civil rights movement. Françoise Hamlin's call to study the civil rights movement "through the context of mothering and women's empowerment and resistance" and her careful analysis of how "African Americans repositioned and transformed seemingly static stations into weapons of resistance, empowerment, and maneuver, rather than dwelling solely within the four walls of narrow Eurocentric constructions of domestic space," suggest the centrality of maternal politics to Black women's activism.[18] Feminist writers have long developed the term *maternal politics* to describe moments when, as Julia Wells notes, "women . . . are not fighting for their own personal rights as women but for their custodial rights as mothers," or when, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, there is a collective sense that "motherhood could be a symbol of power."[19] I am thus mindful of both the rich historical archive on Black maternal politics and the theoretical effort to define—and, in the case of Collins, defend—the political and affective power of Black maternal politics.

In the context of this project, I consider Black maternal politics in two ways. First, I read Black maternal politics as practices of survival, forms of advocacy, and strategies developed for safeguarding Black maternal and child life, for making visible how obstetric violence *is* a form of state violence that threatens to engulf Black bodies, for making apparent how BLM *is* a Black Mamas Matter movement. These are political projects that are necessarily Black feminist and that stage their work in the service of "More Life" in its varied forms, including the right to live, breathe, eat, drink clean water, move around cities, and traverse public spaces without fear. They use Black maternity as a platform for imagining varied and robust visions of freedom, and they treat Black mothers as the paradigmatic symbol around which to make the vital need for "More Life" visible. And, as I argue in this book, they are political projects that wage their work strategically around certain affects—sorrow, grief, hurt—precisely because these affects authorize Black maternal work in ways that rage, desire, and longing still do not. When I describe *Black maternal politics*, I unearth the various political projects that unfold under the banner of Black motherhood, projects that manifest themselves in myriad ways, ranging from Black peer breastfeeding classes to Black doula trainings, rather than treating Black motherhood as a singular or united space marked by a particular set of political desires. I also use the term *Black maternal politics* to understand Left efforts to expose crisis, to respond to Black death by emphatically naming the crisis as a key political issue, and to secure a claim to speaking for the multiply marginalized by naming Black

mothers as bodies that matter. Yet the materiality of Black mothers' bodies, and the urgency of their political needs, often falls out of this iteration of Black maternal politics, even as this form of organizing has been a powerful way for Black women to achieve an ostensibly legitimate platform for staging political dialogue about their needs. In this inflection of Black maternal politics, I study how the birthing Black mother becomes a political category that can garner certain kinds of affective engagement: pity, compassion, encouragement, support.

I construct my conception of Black maternal politics in conversation with Erica S. Lawson's work on "bereaved Black mothers," which reads Black maternal grief as the foundation of certain forms of Black female activism. Lawson treats Black maternal grief as both public and gendered, arguing that "while grief is not exclusively maternal, it is a differently gendered emotion with unique implications for women's activism. . . . By giving and preserving life, Black mothers threaten anti-Black necropolitics in the racial state."[20] For Black mothers, Lawson argues, grief becomes a way of making visible Black male death, and the pain of standing next to—and sometimes for—one's slain Black son is the foundational act of Black maternal political subjectivity. This public grief becomes the basis of political activism, the foundation of a form of political work that enables Black mothers to place critical attention on the antiBlack logics at the heart of the racial state and to connect forms of racial violence from across historical periods. My conception of Black maternal politics is also indebted to Ruth Feldstein's analysis of race and motherhood, particularly her engagement with Mamie Till Bradley's decision to "let the world see" Emmett Till's mutilated body (an analysis that Lawson also centers in her work). For Feldstein, the strategic mobilization of motherhood as a political identity reveals the "radical potential of traditional roles."[21] Feldstein writes, "When Mamie Till Bradley opened her son's casket 'to let the people see,' she exposed more than her dead son's body. She had the courage and the determination to translate her personal pain and her family's tragedy into political terms. In negotiating her private role as a mother into the public and political sphere, she helped change the terms on which her son's death was understood and debated."[22] Like Lawson, Feldstein treats the willingness to place private grief on public view as a form of Black maternal activism strategically waged by Bradley, and thus Feldstein reads Bradley as a political actor who consciously and boldly deployed Till's funeral as a space for making painfully visible the brutality of antiBlack violence.

What Feldstein and Lawson share in their conception of "bereaved Black mothers" is the notion that Black maternal politics are born from private grief *transformed* into public action. Black maternal political subjectivity is thought

to emerge from a wound that shifts the Black mother from an apolitical subject to a political one, from a private life to a public one. In this account, there was a Black maternal apolitical past, a rupture constituted by violence, and a present marked by respectable political activism rooted in loss, not anger. I probe the utility of this prevailing frame that attaches righteous and legible Black maternal politics to tragedy, that figures Black maternal activism as a form of politics born from trauma as opposed to already existing. I ask why Black maternal politics garners its currency from the idea that it emerges *only* after grief, and that its respectability and power are made possible because of loss. This book is born from a desire to interrogate and trouble this narrative of Black maternal political life, as well as to understand the political utility of this narrative, recognizing that Black mothers often deploy this narrative to make palatable and actionable their politics even as their own presentations of their histories and political desires often challenge this very narrative.

In probing Black maternal politics, I also consider the Black maternal affects that are culturally authorized—grief, sorrow, mourning—and those that remain relegated to the periphery, including Black maternal rage. As I argue in chapter 4, cultural markets constructed around—and profiting from—both Black male death and Black maternal grief hinge on suturing Black maternal life to respectable performances of sorrow. These are performances imagined to effect change. For example, in the weeks following Ahmaud Arbery's murder in 2020, his mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, powerfully advocated for hate crime legislation in Georgia—one of four states with no hate crime laws. In her passionate pleas for legal change, she mobilized grief to argue for legislative reform.[23] Her advocacy connected her son's murder to the homophobic murder of Ronald Trey Peters in 2019,[24] to swastikas spray-painted on the walls of a Georgia high school,[25] and to a white teenager's 2019 planned knife attack in a Black church in Georgia.[26] Yet in a cultural milieu that continues—as Robin D. G. Kelley argues—to value white property over Black life, expressions of Black rage continue to be disavowed and treated as excessive, problematic, or counterproductive. In 2017, when Valerie Castile, Philando Castile's mother, stood on the steps of a Minnesota courthouse and spoke about the not guilty verdict in the case against Officer Jeronimo Yanez, she said emphatically, "The system continues to fail Black people, and it will continue to fail you all."[27] Three years later, she responded to the murder of George Floyd and again wielded the language of warning: "I've said it time after time. You cannot keep treating people this way. They're going to rebel. I knew this day would come. George Floyd was the straw that broke the camel's back."[28] Castile voices her sense that "this day would come," that Black rage—sometimes in partnership

with white rage—would be the rational response to centuries of uninterrupted white supremacist patriarchal violence. Her warning though suggests the ongoing invisibility of Black maternal rage as a politically efficacious affect. In positing the relative absence of cultural space for Black maternal rage, my impulse is not to place grief and rage in tension. Instead, I probe the kinds of Black maternal affects and performance of Black motherhood that are cast as politically generative, as well as those that are too often dismissed or concealed in the name—the illusion—of a common good.

Crisis

The years spanning 2010–20 have been marked by an abundance of journalistic attention to Black maternal and infant health (which is often described as journalistic advocacy on behalf of Black life itself): in a 2017 *Los Angeles Times* article, Ann M. Simmons described Black maternal mortality as "the quiet crisis among African Americans," and ProPublica and NPR began collaborating on their "Lost Mothers" series, which investigated maternal deaths.[29] That same year, Annie Waldman reported that hospitals that are "Black-serving"—the institutions where Black mothers are most likely to deliver their children—are the same hospitals where mothers are more likely to experience postpartum complications, including infections and embolisms. Waldman's article emphasized a single cause for this racial disparity in postpartum health: racism. In her description of public health data from New York City, she writes, "Even when accounting for risk factors like low educational attainment, obesity and neighborhood poverty level, the city's black mothers still face significantly higher rates of harm, the agency found. Of note, black mothers who are college-educated fare worse than women of all other races who never finished high school. Obese women of all races do better than black women who are of normal weight. And black women in the wealthiest neighborhoods do worse than white, Hispanic and Asian mothers in the poorest ones."[30] A year later, Villarosa's article also emphasized that the single cause of differential outcomes for Black and white mothers, for Black and white infants, is racism. She writes, "For black women in America, an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism can create a kind of toxic physiological stress, resulting in conditions—including hypertension and pre-eclampsia—that lead directly to higher rates of infant and maternal death. And that societal racism is further expressed in a pervasive, longstanding racial bias in health care—including the dismissal of legitimate concerns and symptoms—that can help explain poor birth outcomes even in the case of black women with the most advantages."[31]

In response to the popular coverage of Black maternal health, there have been various local, state, and federal efforts to "respond" to the enduring condition of antiBlack obstetric violence and perinatal neglect newly cast as an urgent crisis. In 2018, the federal government passed the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act, which provided federal grants to states that actively investigate maternal deaths; fifty-seven members of Congress joined the newly formed Black Maternal Health Caucus; and Illinois senator Dick Durbin and representative Robin Kelly introduced the Mothers and Offspring Mortality and Morbidity Awareness Act (MOMMA Act), which would "improve access to culturally-competent care" and extend Medicaid coverage to a full year postpartum.[32] And a few days before Mother's Day in 2019, Senator Cory Booker and Representative Ayanna Pressley introduced a bill called the Maximizing Outcomes for Moms through Medicaid Improvement and Enhancement of Services Act (MOMMIES Act), which extended Medicaid coverage—which was required to last sixty days following birth, though some states had longer periods of coverage—for postpartum women to a year after giving birth and explicitly supported "services that are proven to positively impact maternal health outcomes for black women," including doulas and midwives.[33]

Similar efforts unfolded at state and local levels: in 2018, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York announced a state response to address Black maternal mortality that would follow Minnesota's and Oregon's leads and expand Medicaid coverage to include doulas.[34] That same year, San Francisco's public health department partnered with SisterWeb to provide doula access for Black mothers,[35] and in 2017 Baltimore launched a program to train city residents to become doulas serving the B'More Healthy Babies Program, a city initiative aimed at reducing infant mortality.[36] In 2019, the city of Washington, DC, formed a maternal mortality commission titled Save Black Women to address the facts that its maternal mortality rates are double the national average and that Wards 7 and 8 in the District lacked maternity wards, which led a representative from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists to declare that "Washington DC is the most dangerous place to give birth in the United States if you are African American."[37]

Despite the proliferation of popular attention and national, state, and local legislative interventions, the Centers for Disease Control's May 2019 report on maternal mortality found that the racial disparity in maternal mortality has not changed and might have even worsened.[38] Danielle Jackson describes this curious intersection of attention and inertia, noting, "The inaction and confusion at the state and federal levels say a lot about gridlock and bureaucratic disorganization, but also, who and what we value in our society."[39] Her work

underscores how the discursive explosion marked by temporalities of urgency often stands in for political work designed to ameliorate the very conditions that produce the "crisis." Haile Eshe Cole echoes the sense that the amplification of discourse around Black maternal crisis often replaces actual political labor to improve the lives of Black mothers and children. She writes, "The contemporary urgency around elucidating the dilemma of black maternal and infant death . . . has in many ways become a means of capitalizing on the spectacle of black suffering and death. Specifically, it has become efficacious and newsworthy to center research and programming on black mortality."[40] Cole's notion that the "urgency" around Black maternal life (and death) is about the "spectacle of Black suffering and death"—and even about the currency that adheres to gesturing to that spectacle—resonates with my interest in tracing how Black mothers' mortality has become a key sign around which the US Left has organized itself in the BLM era, even as Black mothers and children continue to suffer. In this moment, simply noticing the racial disparities that mark Black perinatal life is treated *as* political work invested in ameliorating those inequities. We might think of this outpouring of attention alongside political stasis as actually constitutive of the crisis frame.

Crisis—the primary frame through which Black mothers and Black motherhood become visible—has affective, temporal, and aesthetic dimensions that collectively conjure up an image of Black mothers occupying a nontime and nonplace, one that is thought to be qualitatively different from the here and now of the contemporary United States. In other words, crisis renders Black maternal bodies out of time and out of place, as noncitizens, as historical actors who do not fit into the present moment. Crisis often performs its rhetorical labor by describing Black mothers as analogous with non-US women. In Villarosa's celebrated article, for example, she describes the Black maternal death rate as "triple the rate of white New Yorkers, and roughly comparable to complication rates in Sierra Leone."[41] Similarly, Roeder's description of Black maternal death rates reminds readers, "While press and publicity around the push offered harrowing stories, women reading these stories in the U.S. may well have come away believing that it was a problem for mothers in villages in Sierra Leone—but surely not in Atlanta or Washington, D.C."[42] These journalistic exposés on Black maternal health often argue that Black women experience forms of risk and violence that would be imaginable—or even acceptable—only outside the boundaries of the United States. We might also consider how obstetric violence inflicted on mothers "in villages," on mothers in Mexico, Sierra Leone, and Uzbekistan, is treated as normalized and inevitable and thus

unremarkable. Black women, though, are imagined to live in a no-nation within a nation, to experience forms of violence that are thought to exist only outside US borders.

Similarly, Black women are figured as living not simply in the "afterlives of slavery" but also in the temporality of enslavement.[43] Villarosa's assessment of Black infant and maternal mortality reports that "Black infants in America are now more than twice as likely to die as white infants—11.3 per 1,000 black babies, compared with 4.9 per 1,000 white babies, according to the most recent government data—a racial disparity that is actually wider than in 1850, 15 years before the end of slavery, when most black women were considered chattel."[44] Villarosa emphasizes the nature of the "life-or-death" situation facing Black mothers by underscoring that the conditions of the present are *worse* than in 1850. In April 2019, aspiring Democratic presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke picked up the 1850 statistic, noting, "We have an infant mortality discrepancy between white and Black America that is worse today than it was in 1850, 15 years before the abolition of slavery."[45] Indeed, this historical statistic has come to be a rhetorical touchstone in the new attention to Black maternal health, widely cited as evidence of the urgency of the conditions of the present and the resemblance of the present to a past that some imagine we have moved beyond or transcended.[46] This conception of the relegation of Black mothers to a no-place, or at least a non-US-place, and to a no-time, or at least to a nonpresent time, works not to mark Black mothers as deviant, but instead to mark them as bodies worthy of compassion, of education, and even of salvation through Left intervention that will enable Black mothers' compliance with edicts of good motherhood. Thus, crisis engenders a certain kind of temporality—urgency—which creates an obligation for swift response, for action to halt the state of emergency.

My understanding of crisis is indebted to Lauren Berlant's work, which calls us to imagine crisis as a genre that "belies the constitutive point that slow death—or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations—is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock."[47] For Berlant, "crisis" constitutes an impasse, not an event, a set of conditions for which there is no ending, even as crisis as a genre is presented as a "state of exception," as a rupture with, rather than a continuation of, the conditions of the ordinary. The genre of crisis, which sounds in the tenor of rupture, amplification, emergency, obscures how crisis

actually refers to ongoing conditions of the ordinary and the labor—physical, emotional, psychic, spiritual—that people are forced to perform to endure. As Berlant notes,

> Often when scholars and activists apprehend the phenomenon of slow death in long-term conditions of privation, they choose to misrepresent the duration and scale of the situation by calling a crisis that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time. Of course this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional tactic, an inflationary, distorting, or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event, because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis implicitly calls for.[48]

Black mothers are not the only site of contemporary crisis. Janet Roitman's work reveals that crisis has become the prevailing genre of US political life. Roitman writes, "Crisis texts are a veritable industry. The geography of crisis has come to be world geography CNN-style: crisis in Afghanistan, crisis in Darfur, crisis in Iran, crisis in Iraq, crisis in the Congo, crisis in Cairo, crisis in the Middle East, crisis on Main Street. But beyond global geopolitics, crisis qualifies the very nature of events: humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, energy crisis, debt crisis, financial crisis, and so forth."[49] For Roitman, "Crisis-claims evoke a moral demand for a difference between the past and the future. . . . That is, crisis, or the disclosure of epistemological limits occasions critique."[50] Crisis then contains an implicit ethical demand for another kind of future and for immediate intervention to transform the conditions of the present into a different kind of future.[51] Crisis discourse has revealed that Black mothers come into view as nonpathological subjects worthy of compassion only through the temporality of urgency and through an insistence of figuring a future that is imagined as a radical break with the present.

Following Roitman's and Berlant's leads, this book thinks about crisis as a framing device, a "redefinitional tactic," that aspires to make visible long-standing forms of juridical and medical violence. Also, this device exposes these forms of violence in order to do justice to the women and children who experience that violence but, more often than not, perform this labor to confer Left bona fides, to establish the Left credentials of an actor. This project probes both institutional attachments to the logic of Black maternal crisis and Black mothers' deployments of the genre of crisis in the hopes of making evident forms of violence that render hospitals sites of death, violence, coercion,

injury, and trauma for Black mothers and children, even as the forms of that violence vary and often unfold under the mantle of protecting Black mothers. I treat contemporary Black maternal politics as performing its work under the banner of crisis, and I view crisis as the primary way that Black mothers are interpellated as political subjects worthy of care and concern. Indeed, I argue that Black mothers have been able to come into political view only through crisis—whether through crises of pathology or crises of lack of support.

My consideration of Black mothers' deployment of the rhetoric of crisis to flag and describe institutionalized violence is indebted to Rebecca Wanzo's work, which notes that "African American women have struggled to gain political currency against narratives that often exclude them from stories about proper victims, and when they are visible, it is often because they powerfully illustrate one or more of the conventions in sentimental political storytelling."[52] Wanzo suggests that "sentimental political storytelling" is a form of narration that mobilizes sympathy for political ends, and that storytelling about suffering, which endeavors to garner sympathy and maybe even political action, must negotiate differing conventions, including "progress narratives that either offer more sympathy for people who are successful enough that they have moved beyond requesting state and institutional intervention" or "the idea that some people who claim to be suffering 'real' pain are only suffering hysterical or phantom pain."[53] Wanzo's notion of the marketplace of narratives suggests the affective and political utility of crisis discourse that treats violence as an interruption and an exception, rather than as the ongoing condition of some people's lives.

I draw on Wanzo's pathbreaking project to study the Left "marketplace" of narratives for Black motherhood, treating them as marketplaces organized entirely by a desire to see grieving, traumatized bodies, and I probe how Black women speak to, in, and through crisis to secure their visibility and to advocate for their needs. Following Wanzo and Berlant, this book thinks about both the institutional construction of crisis in the service of political currency *and* the strategic deployment of crisis rhetoric by Black mothers and by activists allied with Black women's imagined political needs and struggles, carefully tracing how Black mothers both represent themselves and refuse to represent themselves as sites of crisis. I probe the crisis framing as a strategic mode taken up by Black mothers and Black maternal activists, and I interrogate the meanings of the state taking up this mode. Black women are not outside the "social problems marketplace," to borrow the term Wanzo develops.[54] This book is deeply conscious of how Black women are key institutional actors mobilizing the notion of crisis to make visible Black maternal suffering and death and to make

apparent the myriad ways that hospitals can be death-worlds for Black mothers and their children. This book, then, remains deeply interested in how Black mothers strategically represent themselves as in, of, and around crisis to secure resources, make visible their needs, and advocate for the enduring importance of attention to Black perinatal life while also, at times, complicating the notion of Black maternal disorganization. In thinking about Black mothers' self-presentation as strategic, I am necessarily in conversation with Darlene Clark Hine's work on dissemblance and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's work on the politics of respectability, both of which trace the strategies Black women deploy to maintain the richness and privacy of their interior lives while laboring on behalf of Black women's freedom. I see Black mothers' engagement with crisis as a way to strategically and lovingly advocate for livable lives, even as there are political costs to this approach. Even as I think about crisis as a Black maternal political strategy, I ask whether there are ways for Black mothers to be visible without the temporality of crisis, without the insistence on their bodies as out of place and out of time.

Histories of Black Motherhood

Though my project is tethered to a particular moment in the representation and circulation of ideas of Black maternity's political charge, my work is informed by the long tradition of Black feminist theorizing about both Black motherhood's histories and Black motherhood as an institution, a site of antiBlack and misogynistic violence, a form of activism, and a lived, embodied experience.[55] It is also shaped by Black feminist scholarship that has troubled the language of rights as the cornerstone of reproductive freedom, gesturing instead toward an expansive conception of reproductive justice, which includes freedoms to have children and freedoms *not* to have children and which always includes the freedom to have one's child live. Indeed, Black motherhood has been a central site of Black feminist analysis, which has theorized Black mothering in at least a few ways: as a primal site of violence with "unmothering" as central to histories of enslavement and to the "afterlives of slavery," or as a dense site of political, spiritual, and embodied empowerment.[56] While I am indebted to scholarship that has moved the field in both directions, *Birthing Black Mothers* considers Black motherhood differently: I ask how Black mothers are relegated to the realm of the symbolic and how Black mothers work with, through, and against their symbolic currency.

Central to Black feminist engagement with motherhood as a site of violence and trauma has been Black feminist scholarship on slavery, which has

emphasized, as Jennifer Morgan notes, the "enormous degree of uncertainty that was manifested in the bodies of children whose future was out of [their mothers'] control."[57] Black feminist historical work has crucially taken up *partus sequitur ventrem* as the cornerstone of forced ruptures in Black maternity, and it centered sexual violence against Black women and the violent control of reproduction as hallmarks of the Black maternal. Morgan reveals how enslaved women "viscerally experienced their embodied contradiction," where their reproductivity was "part of [their] owners' mathematics" and a source of "great anxiety, if not anguish" for the women.[58] As Morgan notes, "Building a system of racial slavery on the notion of heritability did not require the presence of natural population growth among the enslaved, but it did require a clear understanding that enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children. Resituating heritability was key in the practice of an enslavement that systematically alienated the enslaved from their kin and their lineage."[59] Because slavery as an institution was built around "losing your mother," both the motherland and the literal violent tearing apart of families, and because it was constructed around forced breeding and the destruction of Black families, a theory of the Black maternal must contend with the *longue durée* of slavery. Black feminist historiographical work—which is always also Black feminist theoretical work—has, then, centered the violent unmaking of Black motherhood as a crucial technology of racial domination. This work has also argued, as Alys Weinbaum notes, that "in all situations in which human biological life is commodified, processes of commodification must be understood as subtended by the long history of slave breeding as it was practiced in the Americas and Caribbean."[60] This, Weinbaum asserts, is a fundamentally Black feminist conception of history and biocapitalism, one that recognizes the "nexus" between slavery and surrogacy, between slavery and reproductive technologies, that develops a palimpsestic conception of temporality that refuses the allure of racial progress narratives.[61]

Black feminists have also carefully considered the legacies of slavery in shaping contemporary experiences of the Black maternal, highlighting both the ongoing state regulation of Black motherhood and the fundamental devaluation of Black motherhood that continues to shape state policy. Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body* remains a field-transforming touchstone for considering the legal regulation of Black motherhood, revealing the long history of the US state's commitment to both regulating and foreclosing Black women's reproduction. As Roberts notes, "Regulating Black women's reproductive decisions has been a central aspect of racial oppression in America. . . . [T]he control of Black women's reproduction has shaped the meaning of reproductive liberty in

America."[62] Roberts's text underscores how control over Black women's reproduction is a central tool of US racial domination, and it captures the variety of state interventions designed to control Black women's fertility, ranging from forced implantation of Norplant to the severe punishment of drug-addicted mothers.

Roberts's work also fundamentally reoriented feminist conversations about reproductive rights from their focus on choice—often a debate about the choice to have or not have an abortion—to one centered on a robust and affirmative conception of liberty. In the years to come, Roberts's scholarship would provide a theoretical scaffolding to the reproductive justice movement, one that was born, in part, because of the limitations of choice as the touchstone of feminist politics around reproductive freedom. Loretta Ross describes reproductive justice as a framework and movement that "goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate and has three primary principles: (1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments."[63] Reproductive justice projects tether intersectionality theory and human rights frameworks to recognize the varied and multiple experiences of mothering and to demand, as Ross and Solinger note, that "the state (that is, the government) not unduly interfere with women's reproductive decision making, but . . . that the state has an obligation to help create the conditions for women to exercise their decisions without coercion and with social supports. In this way, reproductive justice rests on claims for both negative and positive human rights."[64] Ultimately, reproductive justice movements and projects like the foundational and celebrated SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Coalition "connect the dots between many social issues that seem unrelated to reproductive rights and to traditional views of reproductive politics."[65] They are, thus, projects fundamentally undergirded by Black feminist theory, deeply committed to centering and honoring Black mothers' experiences. Yet, as Khiara M. Bridges argues, reproductive justice movements have also become institutionalized within feminist political work more generally, rendering "reproductive justice" the primary way that political organizers describe their investments and commitments, even when their investments move far from women of color's bodily autonomy.[66]

While Black feminist historiographical work emphasizes the centrality of reproductive unfreedom and unmothering to an account of Black women's maternal experiences, there remains a considerable scholarly debate on how to account for unmothering—whether the literal ripping apart of enslaved families or the state's ongoing commitment to curtailing Black mothering. Sasha Turner's work offers a strong critique of what she sees as a prevailing Black

maternal resilience narrative. Instead, Turner calls for a sustained historical engagement with enslaved women's maternal grief. This engagement would transform interpretations of maternal loss that treat grief as a strategy through which mothers became "the emotional center of the family," shore up ideas of "female frailty and delicacy," or render invisible enslaved women's sorrow.[67] Recent Black feminist work on mothering has been committed to showing how the "afterlives of slavery" continue to affect quotidian experiences of mothering, and it has suggested the centrality of sorrow—particularly sorrow that is not tethered to "grievance" and the pursuit of judicial recourse—to analyses of Black maternal life.[68] Dána-Ain Davis notes, "To be sure Black mothering can be sorrowful when we lose our children but also just the *threat* of losing our children can precipitate an almost constant state of sorrow. We have been losing our children for centuries: through the slave trade, the plantation system, and as a result of infant mortality. We have lost our children as a consequence of the 'war' on drugs, stop and frisk policies, and to the prison industrial complex."[69] Here, loss is constitutive of Black mothering—where loss constitutes both the actual theft of Black children and living with the possibility of Black death. And the labor of engaged Black feminist theory and praxis is to make analytical space for sorrow and to treat it as indicative of a presence we must welcome to get to a greater truth.

Other Black feminist scholarship centers Black mothers' experiences, responding to a feminist canon that has neglected Black mothering entirely. At times, this work has moved in a celebratory register, treating Black motherhood as "a site where [Black women] can develop a belief in their own empowerment. Black women can see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, for acquiring status in the Black community and as a catalyst of social activism."[70] This Black feminist work on mothering has often exploded biological conceptions of motherhood, theorizing "othermothers" and "all our kin" to foreground communal styles of mothering, caregiving, and being-together that bind Black women to Black communities, and that even render Black children as what Karla FC Holloway terms "community property."[71] Importantly, for Black feminists, the conceptions of mother and mothering are not tethered to the biological or the reproductive. Black feminist work on community mothering, as well as conceptions of mothering-work as a practice of care that can be engaged in on behalf of others and even on behalf of the self, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminds us, gives us a capacious conception of mothering.[72] Collins, for example, celebrates othermothers as "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" and notes that these othermothers "are key not only in supporting children but

also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood."[73] Black motherhood, then, is largely described and celebrated as a communal affair marked by a community of women who collectively labor to create radical sanctuary for Black life. Often absent from this Black feminist celebration of Black maternal advocacy and care are a rigorous interrogation of the gendered politics of parenting and a critique of how bloodmothering *and* othermothering largely remain relegated to devalued women's work.

Black feminist historical work on mothering—with its commitment to both exposing enduring violence and the experiential—forms the backdrop of my exploration of the logics and temporalities of crisis and urgency. Yet I explore how data and metrics about Black maternal precarity, and journalistic coverage of Black maternal death, have made Black mothers into symbols of another kind. My project advances a reading rooted neither in romantic resilience nor in trauma and instead probes how and why resilience and trauma seem to be the necessary frames for making visible Black mothers' political agency and visibility. Moreover, I critically interrogate how, for example, frameworks like reproductive justice have become installed, institutionalized, and used to describe myriad forms of feminist activism around reproductive rights, including advocacy that moves apart from Black feminist ethics and investments. Here, like my work on intersectionality, I track the institutional lives (and even afterlives) of Black feminist innovations, reading "reproductive justice" as a framework that has traveled far from its investments in the obstetric violence inflicted on the perinatal Black body to a fundable and politically desirable way of branding various forms of political and programmatic projects. This, then, lets me probe the institutional value and currency of Black feminist innovations and explore their uptake in projects by the US Left.

Black Lives Matter

Birthing Black Mothers treats BLM not simply as a powerful political project that makes a claim for the value, visibility, and vitality of Black life over and against state-sanctioned antiBlack violence. I also treat it as an aesthetic movement marked by the birth of new markets—including literary and visual markets—that render visible and circulate certain forms of Black cultural production, including certain representations of Black maternity. I also understand BLM to undergird the dramatic uptick of work—academic and activist—on the health effects of both daily racism and physician bias, a new and profound attention to how "racism gets under the skin," and a return to earlier work on the embodied

and even molecular effects of discrimination, stigma, and antiBlackness.[74] This shift is visible in interventions like the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) first public statement on racism in 2019, which centers the effects of racism on children's health, noting, "Racism is a core social determinant of health that is a driver of health inequities. . . . These health inequities are not the result of individual behavior choices or genetic predisposition but are caused by economic, political, and social conditions, including racism."[75] The AAP urged pediatricians to assess patients for stressors and "social determinants of health often associated with racism" and to attend to the effects of "vicarious racism" on children's health.[76] The shifts in the political life of public health are also evident in the activist work of groups like White Coats for Black Lives (WC4BL), a national organization of medical students that has called institutional attention to medical racism, asking about the collective responsibility of physicians to combat racism and to develop an expansive conception of patient care that includes examining the health effects of carcerality and poverty.[77]

Yet the shifts in public health discourse—if not practice—engendered by BLM are particularly visible around a sustained public health attention to Black mothers' collective suffering. This is particularly clear in the new and sustained attention to Arline T. Geronimus's work on "weathering," work that was cited extensively in Villarosa's *New York Times Magazine* article.[78] Geronimus coined "weathering" in 1992 to describe the premature health deterioration of Black people as a direct consequence of "the cumulative impact of repeated experience with social or economic adversity and political marginalization."[79] Weathering illustrates how racism literally erodes the body, wearing it away over time, and captures how chronic stress can, over time, render the body vulnerable at a cellular level. Geronimus built her now widely cited concept around Black maternal health. In one of her studies, she found that Black women in their twenties had higher rates of infant mortality than Black teenagers, while the opposite was true for white women. She attributed elevated rates of infant mortality among Black women to the cumulative effects of racism, to the corporeal toll of racial violence.[80] She has also found that racial stress makes itself visible even at the molecular level, with one study showing that Black women in their forties and fifties appear—at a chromosomal level—to be seven and a half years older than a white person of the same age.[81] This "accelerated biological aging," which Geronimus measured through analyzing telomere length, suggests that "social structural processes exert their impact on morbidity and mortality to produce racial health inequality."[82] The attention to Black infant and maternal mortality has made weathering part of a popular, scholarly, and political conversation on the health outcomes of racism, with Black maternal bodies acting as a

kind of urtext for understanding the embodied costs of racism.[83] Geronimus has recently noted how her work on weathering was initially mocked—some public health scholars treated her work as problematically advocating for inherent genetic differences between Blacks and whites.[84] If in the 1990s, she was accused of pathologically advocating so-called teenage pregnancy, in a BLM era, one newly attentive to the medical consequences of racial stress, she is celebrated as posing "questions [that were] ahead of their time."[85]

Thus, I treat BLM as a capacious social movement that has performed its work, at least in part, by making the claims that Black *maternal* lives matter, that Black maternal death is an issue of state-sanctioned violence, and that we have come to view Black mothers as the quintessential political Black subject. In making these arguments, I put two timelines in conversation: a set of activist work around state-sanctioned violence against Black men, and a set of activist and aesthetic projects around medical violence against Black women. Part of my endeavor is to trouble the narrative that the symbol of BLM is the slain Black male body; instead, we must consider how the Black mother—whether figured as the guardian of her dead Black son or the pregnant mother battling obstetric violence in her quest to literally birth Black life—has also become a key symbol of the movement.

How might we historicize the movement for Black life? Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes, "Every movement needs a catalyst, an event that captures people's experiences and draws them out from their isolation into a collective force with the power to transform social conditions. Few could have predicted that white police officer Darren Wilson shooting Mike Brown would ignite a rebellion in a small, largely unknown Missouri suburb called Ferguson."[86] Taylor's vision of BLM roots its histories in Ferguson and the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, and it underscores that normalized and unredressed police violence was the "catalyst" for BLM. I read BLM more broadly, suggesting that it has also been a call to "defend the dead," to "tend to the Black dead and dying" through a concerted practice of lovingly "saying their names," publicly remembering slain Black people, including Philando Castile, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Tony McDade, Freddie Gray, Riah Milton, Akai Gurley, Laquan McDonald, Alton Sterling, Keith Lamont Scott, Natasha McKenna, Paul O'Neal, Christina Taylor, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells, and Eric Garner.[87] We might then even think of BLM as a project that asks us to listen to the dead speak, whether in the form of video from Sandra Bland's phone that surfaced four years after her death or in the form of police texts sent minutes after Eric Garner's murder that declared Garner's murder "no big deal."[88] "Defending the dead" is a capacious

project that recognizes the many ways that Black life is curtailed, surveilled, and limited, the host of ways that Black life is constructed as socially disposable. As Alicia Garza notes, "It [BLM] is an acknowledgement that Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgement that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgement that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence."[89] We can understand BLM, like reproductive justice movements, as broad in its conception of violence and harm.

If Taylor's narrative of BLM begins with Ferguson, for other scholars and activists the movement "begins" with Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012. Martin was murdered at the Retreat at Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida, the gated community where he was visiting his father and his father's girlfriend.[90] George Zimmerman, who imagined himself as a one-man neighborhood watch, claimed he shot Martin in self-defense and was ultimately acquitted of Martin's murder in 2013. Zimmerman's acquittal sparked nationwide protests, oftentimes drawing on the symbol of the hoodie, the now-iconic sweatshirt that Martin was wearing when Zimmerman killed him, a garment that Zimmerman used to describe and rationalize Martin's "suspiciousness." Two years later, Brown was murdered by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. The nonindictment of Wilson, the *New York Times*' decision to refer to Brown as "no angel," the militarized response to protesters in Ferguson, and the Ferguson officials' decision to leave Brown's body lying in the summer heat for hours made "Ferguson" a shorthand for a pervasive and routinized antiBlack violence.[91] That same year, in 2014, Eric Garner was murdered by the New York Police Department (NYPD) who placed him in a chokehold—a tactic prohibited by the NYPD in 1993—because Garner was selling single cigarettes without tax stamps.[92] Garner's final words, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe," became a rallying call for BLM for protecting Black life, for safeguarding Black breath. That same year, Akai Gurley was shot by Officer Peter Liang who was patrolling the stairwell in the Louis Pink Houses in Brooklyn, New York (Liang was convicted of manslaughter in 2016—though a judge reduced the conviction to criminally negligent homicide and sentenced Liang to five years of probation and eight hundred hours of community service)—and Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child, was shot by a white police officer in Cleveland (the grand jury declined to indict the officer). A year later, in 2015, Sandra Bland was stopped in Prairie View, Texas, for a traffic violation. When the officer ordered Bland to extinguish her cigarette and to get out of her car, she refused, and he pointed

his Taser at her and shouted, "I will light you up!" Bland was found hanging in a jail cell three days later (the state ruled it a suicide). I recount some of these deaths not to participate in the all-too-familiar spectacularization of antiBlack violence, but in the spirit of aggregating these cases to read patterns of Black death and white nonindictment, to capture the sheer ordinariness of these deaths. I also recount them to make visible the attention to state-sanctioned death that unfolded in a short period; the intensity of the coverage of each of these stories made the frighteningly routinized experiences of Black death suddenly a national spectacle.

If BLM has made visible both these routinized forms of violence and the sustained grief that surrounds them, it has also been an umbrella under which a variety of forms of protest have been staged, ranging from organized responses to militarized state violence in the streets of Ferguson in 2014 and across the nation in response to George Floyd's murder in 2020; to protests against the murder of Black people attending a Bible study group in a Charleston, South Carolina, church by a white supremacist in 2015; to public actions like National Football League player Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the National Anthem in 2016. These forms of activism have been met by various forms of punishment—including economic punishment as in the case of Kaepernick and sustained practices of violent harassment and surveillance of BLM activists (the FBI, for example, warned of "Black identity extremists" espousing "perceptions of unjust treatment of African-Americans and the perceived unchallenged illegitimate actions of law enforcement will inspire premeditated attacks against law enforcement").[93]

At times, Black maternal politics unfold in distinct ways from BLM's most public activist and advocacy work, often performing their political work through the guise of the *apolitical*, through the promise that politics waged in the name of maternal activism are more akin to a spiritual calling than a politic. In 2016, for example, at the Democratic National Convention, Mothers of the Movement appeared onstage to confer their legitimacy, respectability, and dignified grief on Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. They also appeared, of course, to provide a reference for Clinton, promising that Black voters could trust Clinton, that Clinton would represent their interests and commitments. The Mothers appeared onstage in an arc that looked like a prayer circle and they testified. Geneva Reed-Veal, Sandra Bland's mother, hailed Clinton as a figure who "will say our children's names," and she assured the audience that "Hillary knows that when a young Black life is cut short, it's not just a personal loss. It is a national loss. It is a loss that diminishes all of us."[94] Lucy McBath declared, "I am still Jordan Davis's mother. His life ended the day he was shot

and killed for playing loud music but my job as his mother didn't."[95] Here, activism is cast not as something chosen but as something thrust on Black mothers who wage their political work on behalf of their dead children. This rhetoric of maternal activism as missionary labor, as given and not chosen, is something McBath deployed in her congressional race in Georgia (which she ultimately won), noting, "Six years ago I went from a Marietta mom to a mother on a mission" and in her insistence that "I have a responsibility to God to walk the path He's laid. In spite of my anger, and my fear that we won't get the verdict that we want, I am still called by the God I serve to walk this out."[96] Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother, also described her political work as inflected by a higher calling—as a "mission"—describing Mothers of the Movement as "mothers now on a mission in the hope of ensuring that the violence doesn't touch other mothers, other fathers, other families."[97] The reference to a "mission" suggests that Black maternal activism transcends partisan divides, that it is apolitical in its commitments to family unity, that it is divinely inflected, performed out of a deep commitment to the dead, that it is soul-work.[98] This, then, is a moment when "a group of mothers who belong to a club no one ever wants to join" can set political agendas and lend political currency to politicians like Clinton and even to artists like Beyoncé Knowles, who included Mothers of the Movement in her visual album *Lemonade* in 2016.[99] The political task of the Black maternal, then, has become an integral part of BLM, particularly because it performs its stealth political work through seeming apolitical.

Efforts like the Black feminist-spearheaded Black Mamas Bailout also make apparent the overlapping concerns of BLM and Black maternal politics. Black Mamas Bailout has tethered the abolitionist commitments of BLM to a Black feminist investment in reproductive justice. Initiated by the National Bail Out Collective, the campaign began in 2017 in cities including Atlanta, Brooklyn, and Detroit and was an effort to eliminate pretrial detention and to focus on women's particular experiences of carceral violence. While the organizers always insisted on their inclusive conception of "mamas"—"We're talking about more than just birth mothers: caregivers, queer mamas, and the people responsible for taking care of our families and communities"—they also organized the efforts around Mother's Day, arguing that efforts to bail out Black mothers would allow them to celebrate the holiday with their families.[100] Thus, the figure of the Black mother became central to their project's activist work and to the organization's plea that bailout efforts would reunite families. In 2017, the effort's inaugural year, they raised $1 million and bailed out one hundred Black mothers and caregivers all under the simple slogan "Money kept them

in. Black love got them out." For Black Mamas Bailout, one of the primary forms of carceral violence is its disintegration of Black familial life, and the "Black mama" stands as the icon of family. To bring Black mamas home is a profound act of family reunification and of supporting Black social life.

While Mothers of the Movement and Black Mamas Bailout are two very different political mobilizations of Black motherhood, they collectively underscore what is a central proposition of the book: Black mothers have become the primary icon of BLM. Even as BLM is often described—and, at times, criticized—for placing Black boys and Black men at the center of its conception of antiBlack violence, this book makes a different argument: Black mothers have become this central icon because they are imagined to stand in for dead Black boys or because they make visible the trauma of losing a child (or the traumatic fear of losing a child). But, as I argue in this book, Black mothers have also become central to BLM because of their position at intersecting forms of state violence. Here, death takes the form not of the police officer's fist, baton, or chokehold, but of the doctor, the hospital, or the delivery room. These spaces of violence—of medicalized violence, which is newly understood to be state violence—are now figured as ground zero in the struggle for Black life. Black mothers are also increasingly understood as productive of Black life itself, as the necessary fleshy beings whose bodies make possible Black life. They have offered a new conceptualization of the meanings and sites of Black death.

Black Feminist Institution Making

If this book tracks how the logics of crisis have led Black women to advocate for their place within—often *deeply* within—existing structures, whether through getting trained as peer lactation consultants or through advocating for the state to compensate women of color doulas, it necessarily sits with Black women's complex attachments to institutions, including the state. In thinking about Black women's fraught relationship to institutionality—a relationship that includes both desires for institutionalization and ambivalence around institutionality—I seek to extend a Black feminist conversation that has largely thought about Black feminists' complex institutional entanglements around the space of the university. Scholars including Ann duCille and Barbara Christian have offered rigorous accounts of Black feminism's simultaneous ubiquity in the academy while asking whether Black feminism—and Black feminists—can "survive" the academy.[101] In these accounts, Black feminism is positioned as an anti-institutional form of knowledge that the university has

strategically taken up—or even cannibalized. But how might we understand a moment when Black feminists—and Black feminist ideas about reproductive justice and birth equity—are actually incorporated into the state's responses to birth inequity and Black infant and maternal mortality? How might we contend with some women of color doulas' aspirations to be reimbursed by the state for their services, for example, even as they frame their work as paraprofessional and antimedical, as I describe in the book's second chapter? How can we understand Black feminist support of a near-mandate to breastfeed, a mandate that is inflicted most perniciously on poor Black women's bodies? And how might we capture and trouble a Black feminist advocacy of the symbiotic relationship between reproductive justice and the state?

This is a book invested in naming, describing, and analyzing what I call the *feminist birth industry* and in spotlighting both the newfound place of Black motherhood in the construction of that industry and the centrality of Black feminist praxis to that industry. Like my earlier work on feminism's institutional work, my impulse here is not to diagnose or bemoan feminism's institutional iterations and desires but instead to think deeply about the challenges these institutional formations pose for Black feminist theory and practice. I develop the term *feminist birth industry* to describe how feminism has remade birthing in myriad ways, including the installation of the idea that birth is understood as a self-making event, one that can be crafted, tailored, and planned both to safeguard maternal health and to ensure an "experience" that meaningfully marks the transition to motherhood. It is not my contention that hospitals are now feminist spaces or that institutionalized medicine is a site of feminist practice. Indeed, the persistence of unwanted C-sections and obstetric violence reveals that birth remains a crucial site of the patriarchal control of women's bodies. Instead, it is my claim that feminism has remade the desires that birthers bring to birth and the demands they can now make about their births, including desires for unmedicated births, for immediate breastfeeding, and for birthworker-assisted labor. I see the feminist birthing industry as including a wide range of efforts that have been institutionalized to various extents and in differing ways, including the installation of doulas, midwives, lactation consultants, and peer breastfeeding counselors; the growing visibility of breastfeeding activism (what Courtney Jung critiques as "lactivism")[102]; the growth of Baby-Friendly hospitals designed to promote breastfeeding; the state support of breastfeeding through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) feeding programs; and the "birth plan," which, at the very least, is a thought-exercise encouraging birthers to imagine or even design a desired birth.

Birthing Black Mothers treats Black feminism—and Black women—as at the vanguard of the institutional efforts that are now unfolding to center the transformative and life-affirming work of doulas, to treat breast milk as a technology of Black life, and to treat maternity wards as battlegrounds in the battle for Black life. In other words, I see Black feminism as a crucial force in shaping the feminist birth industry, as central to feminist labor to alter birth and its meanings, aesthetics, politics, and outcomes. I study how Black women's engagement with "crisis"—an engagement that often explicitly mobilizes the language of Black feminist theory (including intersectionality)—often includes an attachment to, rather than a divestment from, institutions like hospitals and an attachment to feminist trainings to enable participation in these institutions. In telling a story about Black feminism's institutional entanglements, I interrupt the conception of Black feminism as an inherently anti-institutional project or, as James Bliss notes, "a practice of critique at, and on, the limits of institutionality."[103] Treating Black feminism not as the uninstitutionalized "nonspace feared by both state power and its most radical critics" but as the vanguard of the feminist birthing industry and its entanglements with the state disrupts one of the primary "stories we tell," one where feminism's institutional logics are the primary terrain of something regularly vilified as hallmarks of white feminism, including governance feminism and carceral feminism.[104] In telling another story about Black feminism, I aspire to interrupt what has become a romantic account of Black feminist theory, one that ultimately hinders our capacity to collectively grasp Black feminism's multiple critical and political desires. In considering Black feminism's own will to institutional embeddedness, my goal is not to demonize a tradition I am deeply invested in. Instead, I seek to do justice to the tradition's complexity by sitting with aspects of it that remain too rarely considered. By considering the institutional ambitions of Black feminist work, my endeavor here—as in all my work—is to trace the complex lives of Black feminist theory and to wholly resist accounts of Black feminist theory and politics, and of Black women, that resort to the romantic, casting Black women exclusively as anti-institutional heroines. I see this as a form of doing justice to Black feminist theoretical complexity and heterogeneity and to Black women's varied and, at times, competing political demands and desires. I see it as a way of doing justice to the material realities of Black mothers' lives—like Malaysia Goodson who comes to be written into the official archive through her "fatal fall," taken up as bureaucratic evidence of Black mothers' willingness to sacrifice their lives for their children.

The book unfolds in two parts; the first is rooted in public health debates and the second is centered on visual culture. The book's first chapter explores

a particular iteration of the "crisis" facing Black mothers—the construction of Black mothers as nonbreastfeeders—and grapples with efforts to support, encourage, and bolster Black breastfeeding by making the claim that Black breast milk is *Black gold*, a crucial technology of Black life. In the second chapter, I turn to the labor of women of color doulas in metropolitan Chicago, tracing how they are increasingly positioned—by the state and by their own commitments—as on the "front lines" of the war to preserve Black life. This chapter captures the tremendous physical, affective, and spiritual labor of these doulas while also considering what it means that the state has invested—at least rhetorically—in largely untrained feminist entrepreneurial labor as that which will save Black mothers' lives. In the third chapter, I turn to a trio of Black female celebrities who, I argue, rewrite Black mothers' relationships to crisis. I trace how Serena Williams, Michelle Obama, and Beyoncé Knowles offer Black maternal aesthetics of friendship, abundance, sensuality, and glamour that effectively rescript prevailing conceptions of precarity, scarcity, and crisis. The book's final chapter turns to an archive of Black maternal memoirs, examining how contemporary Black maternal life writing both sits with and against crisis, at times offering visions of the Black maternal that refuse logics of death and tragedy and reframe the figure of the Black mother and her psychic and political capacities. In the coda, I turn to considering the place of Black mothers in the "third pandemic," a term used by activists to describe the intersection of COVID-19, the murders of Black people by the police, and Black maternal mortality.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Only about a quarter of the subway system's 472 stations have elevators, and the ones that exist are often out of order. Ameena Walker, in "Here's What the NYC Subway Map Looks Like," shows a map of the NYC subway system that includes only accessible stations to make visible these profound issues.

2 In March, the medical examiner released her cause of death as an irregular heartbeat that was complicated by an enlarged heart and an "overactive thyroid." Reakes, "Cause of Death Determined for Stamford Woman."

3 An example of this callousness occurred when the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) issued an official apology after it was revealed that no one from the MTA had called Goodson's family to offer condolences. Their chief said, "It's generally customary that police officials do that. Let me cut to the chase. Sorry that it didn't happen. That's regrettable. What happened with Ms. Goodson was unbelievably tragic . . . and that's why we're re-doubling our efforts to make our system a lot more accessible." See Siff, "MTA Chair." For the invisibility of poor Black mothers, see, for example, Gold and Fitzsimmons, "A Mother's Fatal Fall"; Rosenberg," A Young Mother"; and Wong, "Cities Aren't Built." Wong writes, "In an email, Amanda Freeman . . . observed that when she was a single mother of a baby, passers-by often offered help to pregnant women, but they were less inclined to support those 'toting crying, wiggling, screaming babies on the subway.'" See also Ettachfini, "NYC's Inaccessible Subway System"; and Chiusano, "What Malaysia Goodson Was Carrying." Chiusano writes, "Goodson had just moved from Connecticut to New York, and she seemed to have been headed from Manhattan to a Queens homeless shelter—maybe she was carrying concern about the future down the stairs with her."

4 Abdur-Rahman, "A Tenuous Hold," 38. A GoFundMe campaign was set up for Rhylee. At the time that I wrote this introduction, $22,000 had been raised.

5 Warren qtd. in Seelinger, "Elizabeth Warren Tackles Maternal Mortality."

6 See Warren, "Sen. Elizabeth Warren on Black Women Maternal Mortality."

7 Gillibrand, "Democratic Debate Transcript."

8 Angela P. Harris, "Race and Essentialism," 596.
9 Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, xxi.
10 The Villarosa article is titled "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis." See the Illinois public act founding a Task Force on Infant and Maternal Mortality among African Americans Act (Illinois HB1), http://ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?GA=101&SessionID=108&DocTypeID=HB&DocNum=1. Danielle Jackson describes an "outpouring of news stories, from multiple national outlets, about infant and maternal mortality over the past twelve months." See Jackson, "Frustrating Year of Reporting." For a sampling of this coverage, see Poole, "Digging Deeper"; Hosseini, "Black Women Are Facing a Childbirth Mortality Crisis"; Bowen, "Black Moms in Illinois"; Martin and Montagne, "Black Mothers Keep Dying after Giving Birth"; and Drum, "How Can We Reduce Black Maternal Mortality?"
11 Roeder, "America Is Failing Its Black Mothers."
12 Roeder, "America Is Failing Its Black Mothers."
13 See this "plan" in Warren, "Protect a Woman's Right to Choose."
14 See Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, 2.
15 K. Harris, "Democratic Debate Transcript."
16 See P. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
17 Davis, *Reproductive Injustice*, 202. Khiara Bridges's work examines how the construction of the "wily patient" operates in racialized and classed ways. She writes, "The wily patient's pregnant body is not read as a symbol of infinite possibility, joy, or self-fulfillment—a reading that may only be reserved for the non-poor. Rather, in light of TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] and the condemnation of welfare mothers in political and popular discourse, the (poor) wily patient's pregnancy is realized as the event that makes the welfare queen possible, the condition that makes the entire welfare apparatus necessary" (Bridges, *Reproducing Race*, 227).
18 Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 6, 61.
19 Wells qtd. in P. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 193; P. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 194.
20 Lawson, "Bereaved Black Mothers," 716.
21 Feldstein, "'I Wanted the Whole World to See,'" 109.
22 Feldstein, "'I Wanted the Whole World to See,'" 110.
23 Cooper-Jones, "How Was My Son Ahmaud Arbery's Murder Not a Hate Crime?"
24 Burns, "Police Say DeKalb Gunman Used Anti-gay Slur."
25 Capelouto, "Swastikas Found Spray Painted at High School."
26 Rojas, "Georgia Teenager Plotted a Knife Attack."
27 A YouTube video posted by the *Washington Post* on June 16, 2017, shows Castile's mother's speech. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJsD4c-CpUA.
28 Castile qtd. in Forgrave, "For Mother of Philando Castile."
29 Simmons, "Quiet Crisis among African Americans."
30 Waldman, "How Hospitals Are Failing Black Mothers."
31 Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis."
32 For the text of the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act, see https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1318/text. See also Kaplan, "Reducing Maternal

Mortality." The Black Maternal Health Caucus "explore[s] and advocate[s] for effective, evidence-based, culturally-competent policies and best practices for improving Black maternal health." See Underwood, "Let's Vow That No Mom Should Die Giving Life." For information about the MOMMA Act, see Kelley, "How the MOMMA Act Will Help."

33 Turman, "Cory Booker and Ayanna Pressley Introduce Bill."

34 Sadurni, "New York to Expand Use of Doulas."

35 Kwon, "San Francisco Doula Program Tackles Birth Equity."

36 McDaniels, "Baltimore Enlists Doulas."

37 Dr. Barbara Levy qtd. in Kubota, Burkett-Hall, and Bernstein, "DC 'Most Dangerous Place to Give Birth.'" New York Times Editorial Board. "Easing the Dangers of Childbirth for Black Women." See also Kubota, Burkett-Hall, and Bernstein, "DC 'Most Dangerous Place to Give Birth,'" on the lack of maternity wards east of the Anacostia River in Washington, DC, leading Dr. Barbara Levy from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists to note, "Washington DC is the most dangerous place to give birth in the United States if you are African American. If you are a white woman, you'll do very well in the nation's capital. We have a major disparity problem here in D.C."

38 Rabin, "Huge Racial Disparities."

39 Jackson, "Frustrating Year of Reporting."

40 Cole, "Reproduction on Display," 93.

41 Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis."

42 Roeder, "America Is Failing Its Black Mothers."

43 This is Saidiya Hartman's formulation.

44 Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis."

45 Blair, "Presidential Candidate Beto O'Rourke."

46 For rehearsal of the 1850 statistic, see Owens and Fett, "Black Maternal and Infant Health"; *PBS News Hour*, "Why Are Black Mothers and Infants Far More Likely to Die?"; and Lakhani, "America Has an Infant Mortality Crisis."

47 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 102.

48 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 101.

49 Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, 3.

50 Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, 8.

51 See Mahone, "State Legislators," for a full round-up of legislative efforts at the state level.

52 Wanzo, *Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, 3.

53 Wanzo, *Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, 10.

54 Wanzo, *Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, 6.

55 My formulation of motherhood as institution and experience is an intentional citation of Adrienne Rich's pathbreaking work in *Of Woman Born*.

56 For "unmothering," see Freeman, "Unmothering Black Women." "Afterlives of slavery" is from Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

57 Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 115.

58 Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 115.

59 Morgan, "*Partus Sequitur Ventrem*," 1.
60 Weinbaum, *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 8.
61 Weinbaum theorizes the "surrogacy/slavery nexus." See Weinbaum, *Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 8.
62 Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 6.
63 Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 9.
64 Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice,* 169.
65 Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice,* 169.
66 See Bridges, *Reproducing Race*.
67 Turner, "Nameless and the Forgotten," 245.
68 R. Williams, "Toward a Theorization of Black Maternal Grief as Analytic."
69 Davis, "'Bone Collectors' Comments," 9.
70 Jenkins, "Black Women and the Meaning of Motherhood," 206.
71 "Other mothers" is from P. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 235. "All our kin" is from Stack, *All Our Kin*. The Holloway quotation is from Holloway, *Passed On*, 8.
72 See Gumbs, "'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves.'"
73 P. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 119, 180.
74 Bichell, "Scientists."
75 American Academy of Pediatrics, "Impact of Racism."
76 Quotes are from Heard-Garris et al., "Transmitting Trauma," 2. See also Heard-Garris, "Commentary," in which Heard-Garris likens vicarious racism to secondhand smoke, noting, "Vicarious racism can be experienced by individuals not directly involved with the racist event, but who can still be affected by it, similarly to how non-smokers can develop illnesses due to inhaling secondhand smoke—cigarette smoke exhaled by others."
77 Garvey, Woode, and Austin, "Reclaiming the White Coat for Black Lives." See also https://whitecoats4Blacklives.org/.
78 See Geronimus, "The Weathering Hypothesis."
79 Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, and Bound, "'Weathering,'" 828. See also J. Collins, "Disparate Black and White Neonatal Mortality Rates."
80 Geronimus, "On Teenage Childbearing."
81 Geronimus, Hicken, Pearson, et al., "Do US Black Women Experience Stress-Related Accelerated Biological Aging?"
82 Geronimus, Hicken, Pearson, et al., "Do US Black Women Experience Stress-Related Accelerated Biological Aging?," 23.
83 For popular coverage of weathering, see Braithwaite, "Biological Weathering"; Campbell, "Lifelong Health Toll of Schoolyard Racism"; Thayer, "Racism Hurts Your Health"; and Ryan, "Racism Got You Stressed?" See also Heard-Garris et al., "Transmitting Trauma."
84 Geronimus qtd. in Demby, "Making the Case That Discrimination Is Bad for Your Health."
85 Roeder, "America Is Failing Its Black Mothers."
86 Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 153.
87 Both quotations are from Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 10.

88 See Winston, "Eric Garner Death." Lt. Christopher Bannon's texts were read at a police disciplinary hearing for the officer who killed Garner (a grand jury had decided not to indict the officer). Upon learning of Garner's murder, Bannon replied, "Not a big deal. We were effecting a lawful arrest."

89 Garza, "Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement."

90 I analyze the details of the Zimmerman case in my article "Unwidowing."

91 The "no angel" description is in Eligon, "Michael Brown." Eligon writes, "Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel, with public records and interviews with friends and family revealing both problems and promise in his young life."

For the militarized response, see, for example, Beavers and Shank, "Get the Military Off of Main Street," which notes that "Ferguson, MO has become a virtual war zone. In the wake of the shooting of an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, outsize armored vehicles have lined streets and tear gas has filled the air. Officers dressed in camouflage uniforms from Ferguson's 53-person police force have pointed M-16s at the very citizens they are sworn to protect and serve." See also Li, "Evolution of Police Militarization in Ferguson and Beyond," which describes the 1033 Department of Defense Program that sends surplus military equipment to state and local police.

Brown's body is described in Bosman and Goldstein, "Timeline for a Body." They write, "For about four hours, in the unrelenting summer sun, [Brown's] body remained where he fell. Neighbors were horrified by the gruesome scene."

92 As I was writing this book, Attorney General William Barr dropped pending federal civil rights charges against Officer Daniel Pantaleo.

93 See German, "Testimony before the Congressional Black Caucus." There has also been increasing attention to what Jim Salter calls the "culture of fear that persists in Ferguson 4½ years after Brown's death." Salter describes how the deaths of six men who were active in Ferguson protests "drew attention on social media and speculation in the activist community that something sinister was at play." One activist described to Salter her experiences of "harassment, intimidation, death threats, and death attempts." See Salter, "Puzzling Number of Men"; and Dickson, "Mysterious Deaths."

94 Reed-Veal qtd. in Gamino and Beckett, "Mothers of the Movement."

95 McBath qtd. in Kaleen, "Black Lives Matter!"

96 McBath qtd. in Herndon, "Lucy McBath"; Coates, "'I Am Still Called by the God I Serve to Walk This Out.'"

97 Fulton, *Rest in Power*, 328.

98 We might also consider the rhetorical power of this missionary language, which secured McBath's victory in a Georgia congressional race in 2018. It was also deployed by both Lezley McSpadden in her City Council race in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2019 (McSpadden lost that election) and Sybrina Fulton in her run for a seat on the Miami-Dade County Commission in 2019 (she also did not win her election).

99 The "group of mothers who belong to a club no one ever wants to join" is how Hillary Clinton has repeatedly described the collective.

100 Arissa Hall qtd. in Chisholm, "Activists Organize to Bail Out Black Mamas for Mother's Day"
101 See Christian, "Diminishing Returns," 214.
102 See Jung, *Lactivism*.
103 Bliss, "Black Feminism out of Place," 727.
104 Bliss, "Black Feminism out of Place," 747. I borrow the idea of "stories we tell" from Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter*.

CHAPTER ONE: BLACK GOLD

1 Meadows-Fernandez, "That Viral Gap Ad."
2 See Bowen, "Model for Gap Paused to Breast-Feed Her Toddler."
3 The "dismal" description is from Maheshwari, "Gap Plans to Spin Off Old Navy." The "kind of win" quote is from Fumo, "Gap Applauded by Moms." The quote about supporting Black breastfeeding mothers is from Moroney, "Whoa! Gap Just Released an Ad with a Woman Breastfeeding."
4 If my project seeks to denaturalize the links among "Black woman," Black breasts, Black women's birthing capacities, and ethical Left politics, I necessarily sit with how cisgendered Black women remain the centerpiece of conversations about the Black breastfeeding gap. Of course, I recognize that breastfeeding is not exclusively performed by cisgendered women or by subjects who identify as women. In 2018, for example, *Transgender Health* reported on trans women breastfeeding after a regimen of estradiol, progesterone, domperidone, and breast pumping, and the article concluded that "modest but functional lactation can be induced in transgender women" (Reisman and Goldstein, "Case Report," 24). Scholarly and popular attention to breastfeeding by nonbinary and trans parents has urged the use of inclusive terms like *chestfeeding* and *nursing parent* to describe infant-feeding practices, and breastfeeding organizations like La Leche League (LLL) have developed statements of support for trans and nonbinary parents, emphasizing that the singular goal of the organization is ensuring that infants access human milk. For example, one of their statements notes that "LLL supports everyone who wants to breast-feed or chestfeed. . . . Trans men, trans women, and non-binary individuals may choose to breast-feed or chestfeed their babies. You do not need to have given birth to breast-feed or chestfeed, as we can also see in the experiences of those nursing adopted babies" (see La Leche League International, "Support for Transgender and Non-binary Parents"). However, it remains the case that the responsibilities and demands of infant feeding remain largely on the shoulders of cisgendered women and that the national imaginary of infant feeding is tied to cisgendered women's breasts. See Lee, "Breastfeeding and Sexual Difference"; Reisman and Goldstein, "Case Report"; MacDonald et al., "Transmasculine Individuals' Experiences"; de la Cretaz, "Troubling Erasure of Trans Parents Who Breast-Feed"; and de la Cretaz, "What It's Like to Chestfeed."
5 McKinney et al., "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Breastfeeding." McKinney's research was publicized in the *New York Times*. See S. Miller, "Working to Close the Breast-Feeding Gap."